

時雨沢恵

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト ● 黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION KUROHAKU KUROBOSHI

キノの旅 XVI

the Beautiful World

Kino no Tabi
-the Beautiful World-
vol. 16

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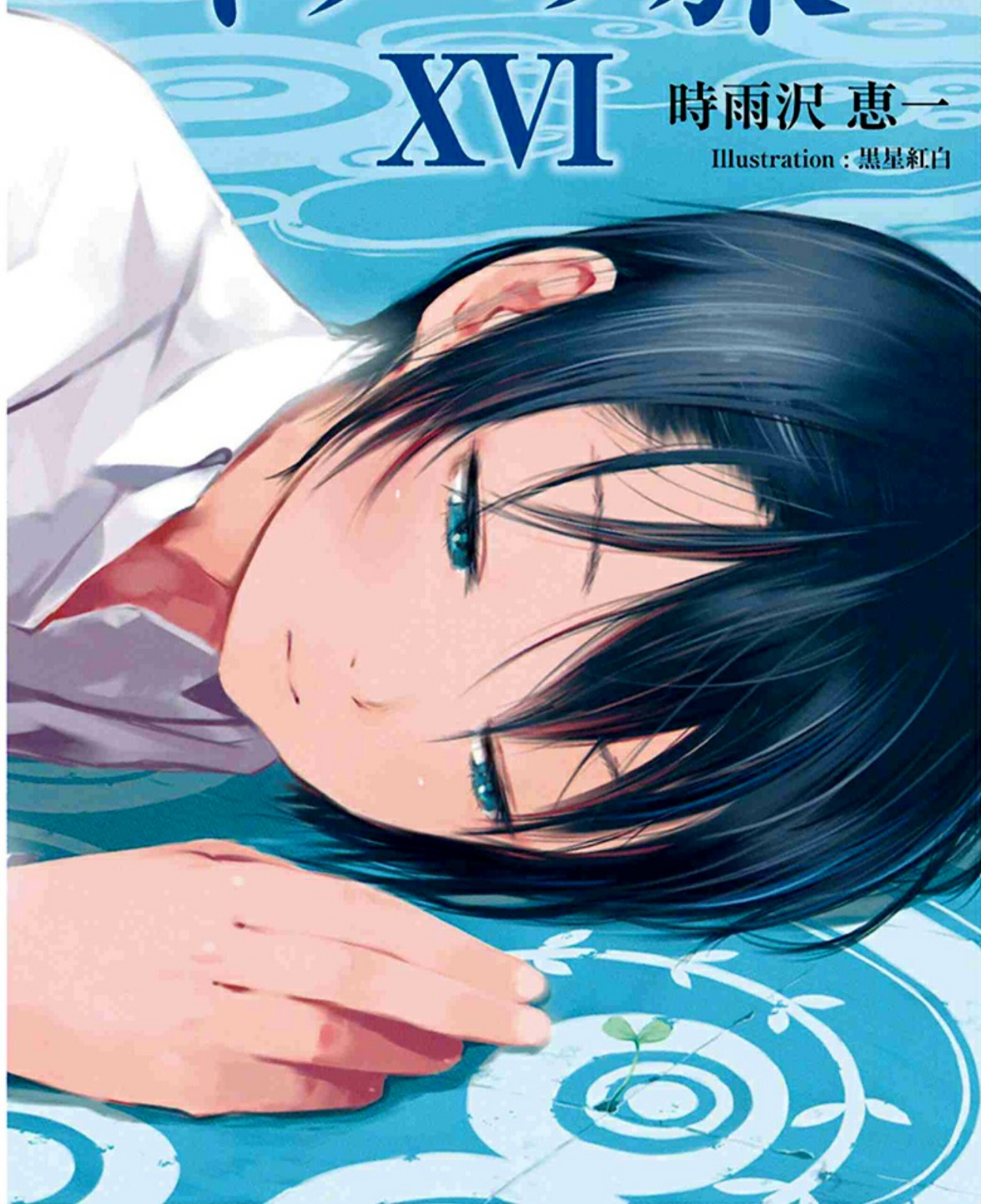
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キノの旅

XVI

時雨沢 恵一

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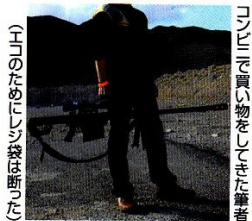
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「H」のためには断った

「H」のためには断った

しぐさわけいいち 時雨沢恵一

この紹介文は、筆者（時雨沢）が書いているのですが、一つ前に書いたやつが、編集さんに「普通すぎる」と言われてボツになりました。「あとがき」のみならず、ここまでボツが？ もう訳が分かりません。誰のせいですか？ 私のせいです間違いありません。

【電撃文庫作品】

キノの旅Ⅰ～ⅩⅥ the Beautiful World 学園キノ①～⑤

アリソン

アリソンⅡ 真昼の夜の夢

アリソンⅢ〈上〉ルトニを車窓から

アリソンⅢ〈下〉陰謀という名の列車

リリアとトレイズⅠ・Ⅱ そして二人は旅行に行った〈上〉〈下〉

リリアとトレイズⅢ・Ⅳ イクスターヴァの一番長い日〈上〉〈下〉

リリアとトレイズⅤ・Ⅵ 私の王子様〈上〉〈下〉

メグとセロンⅠ・Ⅱ 三三〇五年の夏休み〈上〉〈下〉

メグとセロンⅢ ウレリックスの憂鬱

メグとセロンⅣ エアコ村連続殺人事件

メグとセロンⅤ ラリー・ヘッパバーンの罠

メグとセロンⅥ 第四上級学校な日々

メグとセロンⅦ 婚約者は突然に

くろはしこうはく イラスト:黒星紅白

プロフィール思いつかなかったからwiki見たら、ジャージマニアってなってたんだけど、私はジャージ好きだけど制服もスクール水着も厚着も薄着も女子ならなんでも好きだぞ！

カバー／旭印刷

キノの旅ⅩⅥ

the Beautiful World

「ボクは昔、一生海を見ることなく過ごすのかと思っていたよ、エルメス」キノが感慨深げにそう言うと、エルメスと呼ばれたモトラドが、軽い口調で返す。「まあ、この世界に住む、ほとんどの人がそうじゃない?」「そうだね。城壁の外に出る人の方が少ない。それは、旅をしてよく分かった」「もっとみんな、城壁の外に出て行けばいいのにねえ。この世界の人間は、どうも“ひきこもり”がちだよ」「“この世界”ってことは……、エルメスは、別の世界を知ってるのかい?」「さあ? そんなの、あるの?」「聞いたのはボクなんだが……。まあいいや。——」(「死人達の国」より) など全10話収録。



キノの旅 XVI

— the Beautiful World —

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SUGISAWA

イラスト ● 黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION: KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI



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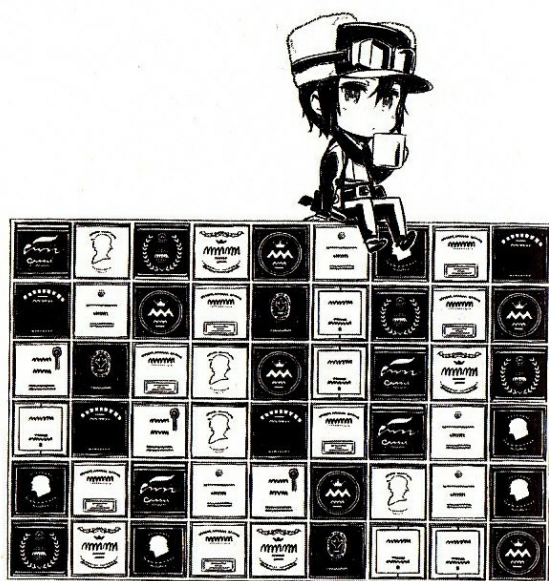
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Design Yoshihiko Kam



キノの旅

— the Beautiful World —

XVI



心に残るのは——
私達の歴史を作るのは——

いつも、いい記憶ばかり
都合の、いい記憶ばかり

—Sweet Memories vs. Sweet Memories.—



黄色く、小さく、まっ白の車に乗って来た、妙齡の女性と少し背が低くてハンサムな男性の旅人二人は、美しい朝焼けが始まったドームの天井を見ながら、話をします。

「今から朝ですか。まるで、一瞬で惑星の裏側に来たみたいですね、師匠。——どうします？ ホテルに入って寝てしまいますか？俺はわりと眠いです。」

男性が聞くと、女性が答えます。

「朝、なら寝る必要はないでしょう。」

「分かりやすい考え、ありがとうございます。」

こうして二人は、夜が来るまで、食事をしたり買物したり観光をしたりと、延々と、ダイナミックに遊び倒しました。

それからぐっすり寝ると、翌日の朝、出国しました。

国の外に出ると、そこは夜の世界です。

「さて、寝ましょう。」

「寝るんですか？ 師匠。さっき起きたばかりなのに、眠れますか？」

「夜は寝るものです。それでは。」

さっと寝入ってしまった女性とは対照的に、

「無理だよこれ……」

男性はいつまでも眠れなくて大変でした。

ようこそ旅人さん。

我が国に入国を希望される方に、必ずしておかなければならない説明があります。どうかお聞きください。

我が国は、ここに来る途中、峠からご覧になったのとお分かりでしょうか。国が完全にドームで覆われています。

この地方の過酷な天候に対応するために、城壁を上げと延ばし、長い年月をかけて完成させました。

国内はドーム天井内側の照明によって照らされています。昼は倉庫を映し出し、夜は月や星を映し出します。天気は自在にコントロールされて、カレンダーにはその日の天気予定が載っています。

そして、ここからが一番重要なことです。

ドームの外の世界で太陽が出て、昼の間に我が国では、夜です。ドームの外で日が沈んだ夜の間に、我が国では、昼です。

なぜ、昼夜がひっくり返っているのか――

それは、発電に関係があります。我が国の電力は、自然エネルギーによって産み出されています。国の側にある水力発電所とドームを覆う高効率の太陽光発電パネルです。ですが、電気が一番必要な昼に、太陽光発電だけでは安定性に欠けます。そこで、昼に太陽光発電で湖に水を汲み上げて、夜はその水を落として、安定的な水力発電をしているのです。

間もなく、太陽は西の稜線に沈みますが、入国したらそこは、朝です。国内はいよいよ明るくなり、人々は動き出します。

生活時間は、朝、から、夜、までです。から、夜中、に開いている店は少なすぎ、観光らしい観光もできなくなります。

――以上で説明は終わります。――

ご了承いただけましたか？

ようこそ我が国に。

ごゆっくりと、滞在をお楽しみください。

「昼と夜がある国」 — Counterclockwise —



日が沈む頃とある旅人がその国を訪れました。
 バギーに乗ってきた、青年と少女と犬の旅人一行は、美しい朝焼けが始まったドームの天井を見ながら、話をします。
 「今から朝ですが、どうされますか？ シズ様」
 犬が聞くと、青年が答えます。
 「もう、普段なら寝る時間だ。ホテルに入つて、カーテンを閉めて寝てしまおう」
 こうして、二人と二匹は、起きないでくださいの札をドアにかけて、十分な睡眠を取りました。
 そして、いつも通りに自然に目が醒めた後、
 「さて、今から。夜ですが、どうされますか？ シズ様」
 「そうだね。星でも眺めようか」
 二人と二匹はホテルの屋上を借りて、そこに横になりました。
 「これは素晴らしいプラネタリウムだね。まるで本物の星空だ」
 ドームの内側で美しく光る、幾万幾億の星を眺めて過ごしたのです。



日が沈む頃とある旅人がその国を訪れました。
 モトラド（注：二輪車。空を飛ばないもの）を指すに、乗ってきた旅人は、美しい朝焼けが始まったドームの天井を見ながら、話をします。
 「今から朝、だつてさ、キノ、どうするの？」
 「眠いから寝るよ」
 「言つと思つた」
 こうして、夜が来るまでぐすり寝た旅人は、
 「で、今からどうするの？ 観光名所も閉まつてるし、走り回る事もできないし」
 「今まで、別の国では一度もやる事ができなかった事が、どうとできる。それをする」
 「はう、それは何？」
 「それは――」
 そして旅人は、夜でも営業している飲食店を探し出して、
 「これが夜食か……。夜中に、ご飯を食べるのは、なんて面白いだろう！」
 その国の滞在を堪能しました。
 「暇！」
 モトラドは、ずっとホテルで待っていました。

Frontispiece: A Land with Day and Night — Counterclockwise—

Welcome, travelers...

There is something I must first explain to you if you wish to enter our country.
Please pay attention.

I'm sure you've already seen what I'm talking about as you were traveling here through the pass.

The entire country is enclosed by a dome.

To deal with the harsh weather conditions in this region, we slowly extended the border walls over many years, until it was finally complete.

The inside of the dome is lit by lamps hanging from the ceiling. During the "day", we project a blue sky on the ceiling, and at "night", we project the moon and the stars. We freely control the weather inside, so we can mark each day on the calendar with the weather schedule.

Also, and this is the most important part —

When the sun is up in the world outside the dome, it's "night" inside the country.

When the sun has set, and it's night outside, it's "day" for us.

Why are day and night reversed?

Well, it's a matter of power generation.

Our country gets its power from natural, renewable sources.

There are hydroelectric plants near the country and high-efficiency solar panels on top of the dome.

However, the sunlight alone isn't a stable enough power source during the day, when we would need it most.

So instead, we use the solar energy to draw up water from the lake, and then in the night, we release the water for a consistent power flow.

—

Right now, the sun is setting in the west, but once you enter the country, it will be "morning" soon. People will only be getting up once it starts getting brighter out.

Not many shops will be open yet, since everyone's day starts from their "morning" to their "night", so there won't be much in the way in sightseeing yet.

—

That concludes my explanation.

I hope it was clear enough for you to understand.

Welcome to our country.

Please take your time in enjoying your stay.

—

As the sun was setting, the travelers made their way into the country.

The travelers were a young woman and a slightly short but handsome man, riding in their beat-up little yellow car. They chatted as they looked up at the "morning glow" that was starting to beam down from the ceiling of the dome.

"So it's 'morning' right now? It almost feels like we instantly teleported to the other side of the planet, huh, Master. — What should we do? Just find a hotel and sleep?" the man asked.

The woman replied, "There's no reason to sleep, since it's already 'morning',

right?"

"Good point. Thanks for keeping it simple."

And so, the two of them wandered around the country until "night", eating, shopping, and sightseeing.

After that, they crashed into a deep sleep before leaving the country the next "day".

They came out of the country back into the world of night.

"Well, time for bed."

"Right now, Master? We just woke up, but you're already sleepy again?"

"The night is for sleeping. See you in the morning." With that, the woman fell asleep almost instantly.

On the other hand, the man didn't feel tired in the slightest. "This is impossible..."

—

As the sun was setting, the travelers made their way into the country.

The travelers were a young man, a little girl, and a dog, riding in their buggy. They chatted as they looked up at the "morning glow" that was starting to beam down from the ceiling of the dome.

"It's 'morning' right now. What shall we do, Master Shizu?" the dog asked.

The man answered, "Normally, this is when we would sleep. Let's find a hotel, close the curtains, and go to bed."

And so, the three of them placed a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door and took a good, long rest.

Then, once they woke up naturally, the dog asked, "Well now it's 'night'. What shall we do, Master Shizu?"

"Let me think. How about going stargazing?"

The three of them went on top of the hotel roof and lied down.

"This is a fantastic planetarium. It's almost like the real sky."

They stared up at the tens of billions of lights shining down from the dome's ceiling.

—

As the sun was setting, the travelers made their way into the country.

The traveler rode a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Just note that it cannot fly). They chatted as they looked up at the "morning glow" that was starting to beam down from the ceiling of the dome.

"What going to do, Kino, since it's 'morning' right now?"

"I'm tired, so I'm going to sleep."

"I figured."

And so, the traveler fell into a deep sleep until it was "night".

"So, what now? All the tourist attractions are closed now, so we can't really go sightseeing."

"Now I can finally do what I've never been able to do in any of the other countries we've visited."

"Ohh? And what's that?"

"Well —"

And so, the traveler sought out a restaurant that was still open. "Ah, so this is what it's like to have a really late dinner... Eating in the middle of the night is amazing!"

It was quite an enjoyable experience for the traveler.

"I'm bored!"

On the other hand, the motorrad was stuck waiting in the hotel for the whole time.

「転がっている国」—— Take Free If You Can! ——

キノとエルメスは、廃墟の中にいました。
何年か前に、どんな理由かは分かりませんが放棄されてしまった国の中にいました。

かつてはこの国で一番賑わっていた大通りにキノとエルメスはいました。

キノはエルメスに頼ったまま、その景色を眺めます。
石畳の隙間から草が伸び放題の道。

斜めに傾いている信号や看板。
落雷で出火したのか燃え落ちた片側の商店街。
そして、

キノ、何考えてる？」

「エルメスが、トラックだったらよかったのに」

「やっぱ」

キノの目の前には、山積みになった携帯食料がありました。

美味しくないが栄養のバランスは取れていて、長い時間保存が可能。携帯食料。

旅の途中でキノが毎日食べているそれが、商店の倉庫に山になつていました。

その倉庫が何棟も並んでいるので、どんなでもない量の携帯食料です。いったい総量が

どれくらいなのか想像もつきません。

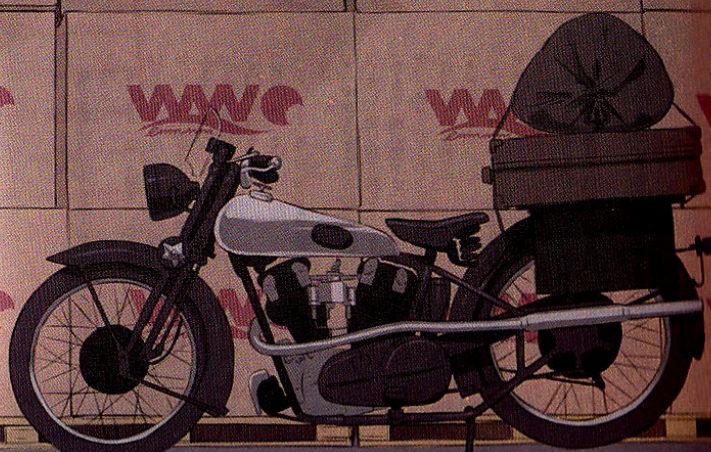
「今からでも遅くはない。エルメス、トラックになるんだ」

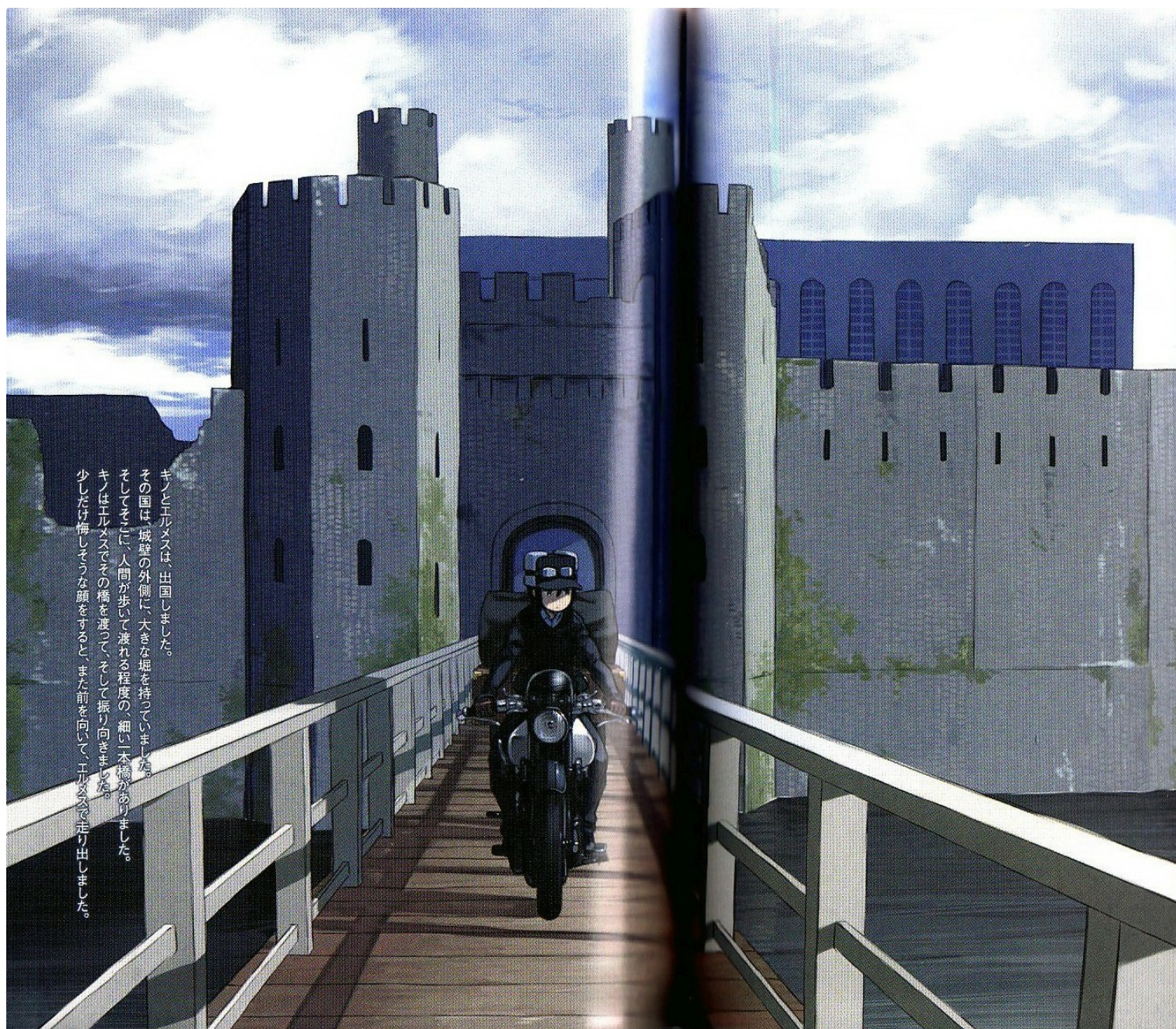
「今までの旅の中で、最大のムチャだね。キノ、それ」

「……」

「よしんばここでトラックに変形できても無理な物は無理だろう」

「……」





キノとエルマスは、出国しました。
その国は、城壁の外側に、大きな堀を持っていました。
そしてそこに、人間が歩いて渡れる程度の、細い一本橋がありました。
キノはエルマスでその橋を渡って、そして振り返りました。
少しだけ悔しそうな顔をすると、また前を向いて、エルマスで走り出しました。

Frontispiece: A Discarded Land —Take Free If You Can!

Kino and Hermes were in the ruins of a lost country.

The country had been abandoned many years ago, although it wasn't clear exactly when or why.

Kino and Hermes were on what must have once been the country's busiest street.

Kino looked out at the scenery as she rode atop Hermes.

There was grass sprouting everywhere from out of the cracks in the cobblestone pavement.

The traffic signals and shop signs were all slanted.

One side of the shopping district was burned down, perhaps from getting hit by lightning.

"What are you thinking, Kino?"

"I'm thinking I wish you were a truck, Hermes."

"I knew it."

There was a mountainous pile of portable rations sitting in front of Kino.

Portable rations don't taste any good, but they're high in nutritional content and have a long shelf life.

And there in the store warehouse, there were stacks on stacks of the rations that Kino ate every day during her travels.

There were so many boxes piled up that it was impossible even to guess how

many there were in total.

"It's not too late to change. Come on Hermes, turn into a truck."

"Kino, that's the most impossible idea we've ever run into on this trip. Besides —"

"..."

"Even if I could turn into a truck right now, this would still be impossible."

—

Kino and Hermes left the country.

The country walls were surrounded by a large moat.

There was a narrow bridge, just wide enough for people to walk across.

As they crossed over the bridge, Kino turned to look back.

Her face was tinged with regret for just a moment before she faced forward once again and drove Hermes away.



Prologue: Land of Love Letters - b —Confession - b—

It was around the time when the population of the town of Forsily had grown by one.

Two travelers and a dog were in a concert hall.

They were at a concert featuring the most famous singer in the country.

They were at the biggest amphitheater in the country.

The seats were packed. Passionate cheers filled the hall.

The two people and the dog were travelers who had just recently entered the country.

They were there thanks to the fact that the songstress had instructed, “*All travelers are invited, free of charge.*”

“Lucky travelers...”

“I’m so envious...”

The people of the country looked on jealously as the two people and the dog were invited to sit in very expensive seats, alongside other travelers.

The male traveler sitting next to them was weeping at the performance, moved by the song.

His tears streamed endlessly down his face.

The dog wondered why the man was crying so much, but,

“...Why am I crying...?”

The man himself seemed to be unable to understand. So the dog gave up.

The concert continued.

The songstress sang on the massive stage.

Her beautiful face shone like a flower in bloom.

She wore a stunning outfit.

She sang a cheerful song.

One of the travelers looking on at the performance--a girl with white hair--tilted her head.

She turned to another traveler.

“That person looks sad for some reason. It’s such a happy song, but she looks sad. And she looks happy. Why is that?”

The other traveler had no answer to give.

The songstress continued.

The title of the song was 'Love Letters'.

“I’m always loved by you, the one I love the most,” she sang.



第一話

「死人達の国」

— Spirits of the Dead —

Land of Corpses —Spirits of the Dead—

Out on the coastal plains, a lone motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Just note that it cannot fly) was lazily running along.

The coastline stretched out alongside a single brown road. The motorrad traveled down the path, with the sea on its left.

The motorrad's rear wheel had black boxes mounted on either side, and a rack on top, with a suitcase and a rolled-up sleeping bag.

The weather was great. Aside from a few thin streaks of cloud, the sky was a clear, almost transparent blue. The blue sky and the blue sea filled the horizon, seeming to go on forever.

The motorrad's rider was a young human.

She wore a brown coat over her black jacket, with the long coattails wrapped around her legs. She goggles over her eyes, and a hat on her head, with the brim over the goggle strap.

"It feels pretty good, right Kino?" The motorrad asked.

The person called 'Kino' gave a big nod. "Yeah, you're right, Hermes. It's a bit cold, but the weather is good and the road is easy-going. Most of all —"

"Most of all?"

"It's nice being able to see the ocean all the time."

"I see. We've always been landlocked before, huh."

"You know Hermes, I used to wonder if I would go my whole life never seeing the ocean," Kino said, somberly.

The motorrad called 'Hermes' replied lightly, "Well isn't that the case for a lot of people in this world?"

"Yeah, you're right, There aren't that many people that ever even go outside

their country's walls. That's one thing I've learned from traveling so much."

"More people should go outside, don't you think? It's almost like everyone in this world is a shut-in."

"Why do you keep saying 'this world'...? Does that mean you know about other worlds, Hermes?"

"I don't know. Do other worlds even exist?"

"That's what I was asking you... Well, whatever. — You're right, Hermes. If more people left their homelands and started teaching and learning from other countries, something new could be born... I want to see a "new world" like that, where that sort of exchange happens everywhere."

"I'm sure if you live long enough, you'll see it," Hermes said softly.

"Yeah, you're right." Kino gave a firm nod.

Asdf

Kino and Hermes continued on through the grasslands, stopping only once to break for tea.

The scenic mixture of the plains and the sea remained unchanged through the entire day.

Then finally, as the sun was sinking in the western sky, they saw something man-made for the first time that day, far off on the horizon.

That is, a set of tall country walls.

Even though the walls surrounded an entire country, from far away only a vaguely rectangular shape could be made out.

Kino smiled. "We got here faster than I expected."

"Even though we would've been here five days earlier if we hadn't gotten stuck in the forest during that storm?"

"You can't win against the weather. At least the storm came while we were in the forest, so we had good weather out here on the coastline."

"Hmm. It all depends on your perspective, huh."

"At this rate, we should be able to enter the country sometime today. Tonight I can sleep in a bed with clean sheets and eat someone else's cooking."

"How can you be sure everything will go according to plan? They might refuse to let us in."

"Why would they do that?"

"Uh, because this motorrad is way too good-looking."

"So I have to walk from now on, huh..."

"What?! Don't blame the motorrad! It's the human that's the problem!"

"I'm a 'good kid' though."

"Do you get to say that about yourself? Well maybe not you Kino, but what if the people living in the country have issues?"

"Oh? Like what?"

"Uhh, what if they're 'shut-in's that don't want to go outside, but they also don't want to let anyone else in?"

"That would be a problem. But you know, Hermes, I made sure to gather a lot of information back in the last country. They said this country is a relaxed land of fishermen, where everyone is kindhearted and welcoming to travelers."

"Really? That's so boring."

"What do you expect me to do about that?"

"So I can't look forward to you shooting up a bunch of murderous bad guys, Kino?"

"You shouldn't be looking forward to that in the first place, Hermes. I just want to visit the country for three days, relax, eat some good fish, and learn a little about how the people there live. I'm not going to let go of my persuader, but I don't want to shoot anyone if I can avoid it."

"True, you don't want to waste good bullets and gunpowder."

"That too."

As they came nearer to the country walls, their conversation slowly petered out, and the wild grass around them crept higher and thicker.

"A country so close to the sea is pretty rare, huh."

Hermes's words stirred an old memory in Kino. "Master once said the same thing. There are a lot of disadvantages when it comes to safety."

"All sorts of 'bad things' could rise out of the water."

"But these people settled her anyway. It really makes you wonder what this country's like —"

From underneath her goggles, Kino narrowed her eyes in excitement. "I can't wait to find out."

She pressed down a little harder on Hermes's accelerator.

Asdf

" — I can't allow you into the country under any circumstances!"

That's what Kino and Hermes were told outside the country walls.

Even from a considerable distance, Kino and Hermes had been able to see that things were not normal.

First of all, the walls were surrounded by a number of trucks, parked next to an orderly cluster of tents. The area outside the country had been turned into a campsite.

As they got closer, they could see that the perimeter was guarded by men with persuaders. Some of them wore green military uniforms, and others wore deep blue police uniforms. There were maybe one hundred of them in total.

"It doesn't look like they're aiming at us —" Kino and Hermes stopped briefly to make sure that none of the men were threatening them before starting slowly forward again.

The road into the country was blockaded by the stopped trucks.

Two of the men dressed in police uniforms motioned for Kino to stop. Kino and Hermes decelerated, coming to a stop in front of the men.

One of the men stepped forward and shouted, "You're a traveler, right? And

you want to go to that country? I'm afraid that's not possible. — I can't allow you into the country under any circumstances!"

Asdf

Kino and Hermes were led between the blockade of trucks and up to one of the tents.

Kino cut the engine and pushed Hermes into the large military tent, which looked to be the command center. The men inside were standing around a huge desk, on which there was a map of the country.

Night was falling. Electric lights were hung inside the tent and power generators gave a low hum from outside.

The men stood underneath the lights, wearing their varying uniforms.

Judging from their uniforms, they appeared to be military commanders or police chiefs. They were all burly, well-trained men. They were all wearing the same dark expression on their faces.

Hermes asked the first thing that came to mind, "So, is this a funeral?"

One of the men replied stiffly, "It's much worse."

Asdf

Kino and Hermes introduced themselves, and then the men in the tent did the same. They were soldiers and policemen from the nearby countries.

The four neighboring countries had joined forces and sent a steady stream of soldiers and police officers to surround this country. They were here to make sure that none of the country's residents were accidentally let out and that no travelers were allowed in.

"Would you mind telling me why?"

Kino's straightforward question was followed by a short silence before a grim voice replied, "There's a sickness, traveler."

"A sickness? What kind?"

"I understand that you're curious, but you might be better off not knowing."

"You might be right. Please tell me."

"...I like your grit. Very well then. It's a disease that 'kills people and then brings them back to life.'"

"What?" "It what?" Kino and Hermes asked at the same time.

The men began to explain, speaking matter-of-factly.

"It's exactly what it sounds like. The disease kills the people it infects, and then their dead bodies start moving again right after. We call the infected, 'the living dead'."

"Seriously, the dead bodies move around. Their faces are pale white, and their eyes are unfocused and white too. They stumble around and if you get close, they try to bite you. If you get bitten, they infect you through their saliva, and you end up infected just like them. You die really quick and then you get back up."

"Sounds unbelievable, right? I get it. We were like that too, until we saw it with our own eyes. It started five days ago. A few people managed to escape and fled to our countries in distress. They told us how a strange disease had taken over their country and turned it into a panic."

"We didn't believe them at first, but we sent several people down here to investigate. The refugees tried to stop them, but they didn't listen... And they never came back."

"Right now, that country is a living Hell. We observed from the wall today and counted several hundred 'living dead' wandering around inside. The country's population is roughly 2000. We counted 112 people that managed to escape during the early stages. We have no clue how many 'infected' might be hiding within..."

"We blockaded the walls to make sure none of them could possibly escape, although we're willing to let survivors come through. However, we still haven't seen any, even though we've shouted it over the megaphone several times."

"As horrible as it seems, we, along with the refugees here, are starting to think there aren't any more survivors left."

"As representatives of our individual countries, we've banded together to do everything possible to make sure the infection doesn't spread beyond this

country. It's kind of ironic; we never got along well until now."

Kino, who had been listening quietly this whole time, raised her hand slightly to speak. "I see. I understand now just how bad the situation here is, and I'm grateful that you stopped me from entering. If we can't go in, I guess we'll just have to turn around."

"Guess so —"

Hermes agreed, but the group of men did not.

"Actually, there's one more thing we have to ask. — 'Kino,' right? Can you shoot a rifle?"

"Well, sure."

"Then, can I ask one more question? You may find it a bit rude, though."

"Go ahead."

"Can you shoot a human being? — Could you shoot a human figure without holding back?"

Asdf

The next day.

Kino rose with the dawn.

Kino wore a black jacket, tied with a wide belt on her hips. "Canon", a revolver-type hand persuader (Note: a persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) sat in its holster at her right hip.

Kino did her light exercises, as always, and then ate her breakfast, as a "reward." It was the military's hard bread and butter, with vegetable soup.

"This is so delicious compared to portable rations."

"Don't you mean compared to your cooking?"

Kino ate every last crumb.

Then she started getting ready for the "job" she'd been asked to do the night before.

First, she had asked to borrow a rifle.

It was a sniper rifle that the military there used for long-distance sharpshooting. The stock was made with green, reinforced plastic, and it was mounted with a high-magnification scope.

It was a bolt-action model. That is, the bolt had to be manually cycled with the user's right hand between each shot. The detachable magazine was fully loaded with large .338 caliber bullets.

The country was almost a kilometer in diameter, so a high-power rifle like this one was necessary in order to shoot accurately from the walls of the country into the center.

"You think a traveling pipsqueak like that can actually shoot?"

"No way. I know we don't have enough people that can snipe, but no way."

"And that's one of our few high-caliber rifles..."

The soldiers and policemen watched with doubt and disapproval in their eyes, but after Kino had taken just five practice shots, the looks on their faces had changed to envy and admiration.

Kino followed the others up the wall.

They attached themselves to a lifeline and climbed up a makeshift iron staircase. Then they used a pulley to draw up the long rifles, the sturdy tripods, and the massive stock of bullets.

The day was starting in earnest now.

The sun lifted off the eastern horizon and illuminated the world. A gentle blue spread across the sky, mixing itself into the sea. The breeze coming off the saltwater was gentle too; they couldn't have asked for better weather.

Kino stood atop the country walls and gazed out at the vast beauty of nature. Seeing the land and the sea both vanishing on the horizon from up high was proof that the world was round. The color of the sea changed partway out, as it took in the color of the sky, painting the distance with three shades of blue.

"It's beautiful," Kino murmured, before turning her eyes back toward the wall.

All along the length of the gray, 1-kilometer-diameter circle, the snipers and their spotters were taking up their positions.

There were 20 snipers. After including the support members, there were about 50 people in all. Every one of the snipers were aiming in at the country's center.

Kino took a relaxed posture, sitting with her legs out in front. She brought out earplugs made from twisted cotton and put one into each ear.

Next, she did a careful check over the rifle she had mounted on a tripod. She loaded in a magazine and brought the bolt back and forth. The first shot was readied into the chamber.

Beside her, a policeman in his forties peered through a pair of binoculars, also mounted on a tripod.

He had been assigned as Kino's spotter.

The man had no experience as a spotter, but he'd been chosen just because he was used to using binoculars for domestic surveillance. His face was gentle, but it showed hints of confusion.

Kino observed the country through her scope. She put her dominant right eye up to the lens and kept her left eye closed.

The city within the walls was built from stone. The streets were wide, and the stores were evenly-spaced, with one-story houses above them and alleyways between them.

She could see the well-constructed houses and streets, as well as the fishing boats in their docks, but there was no sign of movement. All was quiet as the morning progressed.

Soon, a prayer from some unknown religion came streaming in from a megaphone outside the walls. It continued for a few dozen seconds, and then stopped.

"That's the refugees praying. It's also the signal for us to start the operation. Can you really do it? Shoot... people, I mean," the policeman next to Kino asked, stressing the word "people."

Kino simply said, "As long as they're in range."

The sun rose higher, filling the country with light. As if on cue, movement

began to stir inside the town.

Human figures walked out from the open doorways of the houses.

Their numbers multiplied as more shapes walked out, as though they had it planned.

Every single one of them had blueish-white skin and pure-white, cloudy eyes.

Their arms dangled at their sides, and their heads lolled about. They looked like puppets that had had their strings cut from everything except their legs.

The policeman looked through his binoculars and said to Kino, "You see that? Those are the 'living dead'. They wander around like that, like they're just having fun in the sun."

"I see." Kino steadied the scope on one of the 'living dead'.

He was a bare-chested young man, around 20 years old. Judging from his muscular build, he might have been a fisherman.

His skin was pure white, but it was studded with tiny green spots, so from a distance, it looked like a solid pale green hue.

His hair was a mess of dried blood. His eyes were snow white, with no visible pupils. His mouth hung half-open, dripping with drool. His face was trance-like, as if he were in a dream.

"'Once they're like that, they can't be cured. They're already dead. The only thing you can do is shoot them dead.' That's how it is."

"Can a 'corpse' die?"

"It's just like they explained — 'If you blow their heads off, they'll stop moving.' We've already had several people confirm it, and it's the only way."

"I see."

"But..." The policeman voiced his skepticism a bit unsteadily. "Is this... really okay? Is it okay to shoot them down like this is pest control? What if they're just in a really bad fever dream? What if they just look like they're dead, and they're not actually 'corpses'? Shouldn't we accept the risk and at least try to send in a group to check it out and try to treat them...?"

"Sorry, but I don't know. Besides — I think it's too late for that."

Right as Kino finished speaking, someone fired off the first shot.

The thunderous roar echoed across the wall-top and then faded.

The policeman's voice mixed into the roar of the surrounding gunfire. "In the center of town, next to the water fountain in the park!"

"Roger." Kino aimed the scope, and with it, the rifle.

The park had a spire with a large bell suspended under it. Around it was a large water fountain.

There were dozens of the "living dead" stumbling around the stone pavement, and in the middle, there was a body lying on the ground, with everything above its nose blown away.

Whoever fired that first shot had scored a beautiful hit right across the brow. Blood and brain matter was splattered around the crumpled body, dying the ground red.

Then, as Kino and everyone else watched through their lenses, something happened.

The other "living dead" stumbled their way toward the body that had just been separated from its head.

"What are they doing? Care for it? Bury it? — No way, do they feel compassion? If that's true, shouldn't we stop this right now?"

"Who knows?"

As Kino replied to the policeman, all of the bodies crouched together.

The "living dead" brought their mouths toward the body on the ground.

And began to eat it.

Using only their mouths, they bit into the flesh, ripped it away, and chewed it up.

They tore away at its clothing, together with its skin. They buried their faces into its torso and yanked out its innards, gulping them down. They licked up the brains and blood lying on the pavement.

"Ugh..." The policeman's voice shuddered out as he watched from his binoculars.

The "living dead" ripped the fallen body to shreds, finishing their meal in seconds.

They lifted themselves up again and went back to wandering around.

All that was left was a puddle of blood. A red stain.

And then the "living dead" —

Were fired upon in unison.

The gunfire echoed in a violent drum performance. The barrage of hate-filled bullets rained down in a supersonic storm.

The shells hit their marks without missing, one after the other.

Some of the "living dead" had their faces dyed red from the feast a few moments ago, and some had been too far away to participate, but all of them had their heads ripped away from their bodies, and their blood blossomed onto the ground all the same.^[1]

Asdf

Meanwhile, Hermes was outside Kino's tent, propped up on his center stand.

He listened to the muffled gunfire and talked to himself, "Ohh, there they go, there they go."

Asdf

Kino gave a sidelong glance at the policeman, whose face was looking as blue as the "living dead."

She raised her voice in concern. "Are you okay?"

The man looked back at her. "I'm okay... I'm okay! Or rather —"

"Rather?"

"What are you doing? Hurry up and shoot 'em down! Kill 'em all! Every last one of them! Clean house!" the policeman screamed, having lost sight entirely of his duty to report the distance of their mark.

"Understood. I'll start with what I can hit then."

Kino looked through the scope at the first nearby "living dead" she saw. It was a boy, maybe five years old — not that it mattered. Kino steadied her aim and pulled the trigger.

Asdf

"Welcome back, Kino."

"I'm back, Hermes."

Kino had left the rifle on the wall-top and descended the stairs for lunchtime.

The other soldiers and policemen that had been on duty during the morning stopped to rest and eat lunch too, but they wore clouded expressions and they didn't speak.

The men that hadn't been on the wall asked them all kinds of questions, but they only shook their heads from side to side. They were still silent as they walked to the command center tent for debriefing.

Kino left the mission report to her spotter, and sat down next to Hermes. She began boiling water for tea, looking neither happy nor sad, just a little tired.

"Pretty flashy for 'janitor work', huh Kino?"

"Yeah. We did a pretty thorough job of shooting everything up. That persuader has a lot of recoil, so my shoulder hurts a bit. Also, my right eye and my right index finger are tired."

"What was harder? This or Master's training?" Hermes asked.

"Master," Kino replied, with no hesitation. "Here I just have to shoot. They don't shoot back."

"I figured that's what you'd say. Master didn't hold anything back when she shot at you. If the bullets weren't rubber, you'd have died a hundred times already, Kino."

"It hurts just remembering it..."

"So, what was it like inside?"

"Well, pretty much exactly as they told us. So we just got into a position we

could see from and shot them down. All of us together probably took out around 500 of them. Oh, and there was one other thing."

"Oh? Like what? — The "living dead" that were shot down got surrounded and eaten up by the rest of them?"

"Oh, so somebody already told you?"

"..."

"Hermes?"

"Yeah. Good work."

"It's pretty rare for you to keep quiet, Hermes. Maybe tomorrow pigs will fly."
[2]

"Well excuse me."

"I heard something from one of the soldiers too —"

"Yeah?"

"Before the 'sickness' became widespread, there weren't that many 'patients'. There were only about 20 people, and they were all kept in the hospital, restrained so that they wouldn't attack anyone."

Hermes asked, "Then why didn't it end with just those 20 becoming 'living dead'? They already had them quarantined. What happened?"

"Well you see, there was a doctor whose lover was one of those infected. So he rushed to the hospital —"

"No way, he released her? He didn't treat her? Because she wasn't getting any better?"

"Yes, exactly. He saw that she'd become a 'living dead' and thought, 'She's still alive! And she's not sick at all!' and he released all of the 'patients'. Of course, he got bitten and infected, and the sickness spread from there..." Kino shook her head slightly.

Hermes asked, "So are you going to do it again in the afternoon?"

Kino responded, "We're going to do it until it's done."

"When will it be done?"

"I don't know."

Asdf

That afternoon.

Kino and the others made their second trip up the wall. They shot down the "living dead" as fast as they could spot them.

As the other "living dead" walked toward the fallen ones to eat them, they were shot down as well. They did nothing to protect themselves, neither running nor hiding.

As the time passed, the number of "living dead" dropped steadily in proportion.

All of the snipers, including Kino, fired continuously and unsympathetically, like machines. Halfway through the afternoon, the number of "living dead" and the number of places they appeared from had dropped significantly.

Now that their efficiency had dropped, they suspended operations until the next day, without waiting for the sun to set. The confirmed "headcount" totaled almost 1500. There were 300 people left in the country, although it was unknown whether they were among the living or the "living dead."

There was a shot from camp to signal the halt order, and Kino fired one last round at a woman in her thirties, blowing away the "living dead's" head, long black hair and all.

Then, "Cease fire!"

Kino removed the magazine without loading another round into the chamber. Then, she slowly pulled back on the bolt, ejecting a large spent casing at the same time that someone fired a shot at the bell hanging from the spire.

The bell rang out, dull and low.

A few of the other snipers followed suit, loading in another bullet for a last shot at the bell.

As reverberations layered over one another —

The blood-soaked country was filled with the tolling of the funeral bell.

Asdf

The next day.

The sky had been full of clouds all day, and the weather changed intermittently, from clear to overcast and back again.

Kino's group had been up on the wall all day for sniper duty.

There weren't many "living dead" left. The number of chances to shoot them on the street had greatly fallen off, and the number of gunshots had decreased to match. Their total "yields" for the morning only added up to less than 50, meaning there were still more than 250 left.

Shortly before noon. The sky was blanketed in clouds.

Kino had been called to the command center with the others, where she was told about a change in plans.

There weren't many "living dead" left wandering around outside. They had concluded that sniping was too inefficient at this point, and they needed to put a new strategy into effect.

That is, they were going to send small teams into the country and do a house-to-house search.

They had no better options to completely wipe out all of the "living dead" still lurking inside. At the same time, it would allow them to rescue any survivors that had managed to escape.

"We'll be forming elite penetration squads. Four people to a team. And Kino —"

"Yes."

"During this operation, you've shown a good understanding of tactics, a strong will, and physical stamina. You can decide for yourself of course, but if possible, I'd like for you to be a part of this."

Asdf

"And then you accepted. You sure are weird, huh Kino," Hermes said to Kino, from outside the tent, where she was preparing for the mission.

Kino had added several pouches on the belt of her black jacket, as well on on her left thigh.

The pouches were part of equipment that she had borrowed, and they were tightly packed with 12-gauge buckshot shells.

They were a cross between "double-ought" buckshot shells, which fire nine lead shots for each shell, and slugs, which fire a single, devastatingly large projectile.

The loaner persuader she was using was a pump-action (also known as a slide-action) shotgun-type. It had a cylindrical magazine under the barrel, which held six shells.

The persuader was unusual in that its metal parts had a dull green luster. In order to protect it against rust in a seaside region like this one, it had been made with a material called "high-chrome stainless steel."

A small but powerful flashlight was mounted on the right side of the barrel, for lighting up humans or anything else indoors.

Kino gave the shotgun a pump, jakon, carefully inspecting the motion. Then she finally started getting "Canon" ready as well.

As Kino quietly continued her preparations, Hino said, "Ah, I got it!"

"Hm, what?"

"Now I know why you've been helping them. You're not just doing this in exchange for food and gas. You wanted to stick to your 3-day rule and also enter the country if you got the chance. You still want to see what it's like inside."

"Well, we did travel all the way here after all," Kino replied, as she double-checked that she had loaded magazines for "Canon" in her pouches.

Asdf

The four members of the first strike team stood under the cloudy sky, in front of the wall.

They were all equipped with shotgun persuaders, as many shells as they could carry, and a backup hand-persuader.

One of them was Kino, carrying a spray can in a small bag on her back.

As for the other three,

"Pff, we'll be fine as long as we stick together. They don't move fast. Just don't panic or get jumpy, stay calm."

First up was a large military officer in his forties, who had been assigned the team leader. He carried ammunition, food, and water on the back of his muscular frame.

"We're getting a bonus for this, right? This is some serious overtime work."

Next was a policeman in his thirties. He was thin to the point of looking fragile, but his eyes were sharp. He had a radio transceiver on his back.

"It's finally my turn to go berserk, huh?! I can't snipe for shit, but leave the shotgunning to me!"

The last member was a cheerful and physically fit soldier in his twenties. He carried spare ammunition on his back.

They were a ragtag team of four, all with different ages and backgrounds.

They looked down at the map and made their final preparations.

Asdf

Hermes watched them from afar.

"So, if it goes well, everything's good. If it goes wrong, then they've only lost four people, and they can rethink their strategy," he said to himself, making sure it was loud enough for anyone around to hear.

"Heartless, aren't they? That traveler's your partner, right?" The words came from a passing soldier, who had been doing nothing but moving gear for the last day.

"Whoops, are you allowed to talk to me? Weren't you ordered not to?" Hermes responded.

The soldier grimaced as he carried his load on his back and looked away from

Hermes. He moved a bit farther away, to hide the fact that they were talking.
"...How did you know?"

"I mean, no one's talked to me for the past two days. I could tell. I've been so bored."

"The higher-ups decided that because they don't want us giving away too much information. Motorrads and humans have different knowledge and ways of thinking, right? So basically we can only trust other humans."

"Ohh, sounds like your commanders are pretty smart. Too bad it looks like their orders don't filter all the way down."

"So motorrads can be sarcastic too, huh? I didn't know that."

"Oh I know how to tell it straight too, you know? Want me to?"

"I'm good. — You can just go back to worrying about your buddy." The soldier spat the words out and began to walk away.

"Why haven't any of the countries here used this to get ahead?" Hermes called after him.

"..." The soldier paused. He understood the meaning behind Hermes's words perfectly well. He looked back over his shoulder and answered honestly, "You're asking why we don't use the 'sickness' to make an army of 'living dead' and attack the other countries with them? Piss off. That's not okay in my book. We were enemies until a few days ago, but I'm sure... the people from the other countries would say the same."

"Oh, alright."

"I'd rather have a 'regular war' than end up turning into a 'monster' like that. There are some things in this disgusting world that would make death look refreshing. Although ideally there wouldn't be any war to start with, I suppose. Anyway, see ya."

The soldier headed off to deliver his load to another country's tent.

Asdf

There was an emergency passage in the walls with a hole just wide enough for a single person. The officer, the policeman, Kino, and then the soldier went

through, until they were inside the country.

Kino stepped out of the long, dark tunnel and looked around at the inside of the country from ground level.

"It's beautiful."

The stonebuilt town was geometrically very elegant. The houses were lined neatly up against the streets, which stretched straight out toward the center of town.

"What are you daydreaming about? Come on, let's go!" The soldier's voice nagged at her from behind as he flicked the safety of his persuader off.

Asdf

The group of four began searching from house to house.

Out in the streets, they had support from the snipers on the wall, but indoors, they could only rely on themselves and their persuaders.

First, the four of them set up a defensive perimeter outside a house with the door ajar. The military officer at the front called into the house in a loud voice, "We're from the neighboring countries. We're here to rescue you! Is there anyone here? If there are, come out!"

They waited for several seconds. No response.

"Let's go. Just like we planned."

On the officer's signal, they turned on their shotgun flashlights.

"Breach!"

The four of them streamed inside. The officer took the lead, with the policeman, the soldier, and Kino following behind.

They shouldered their persuaders as they moved, so they were ready to shoot as soon as they saw anything. They walked briskly in a slight hunch to reduce the motion in their upper bodies.

The house wasn't particularly complex, so they swept through one room to the next.

"Clear!"

With the officer's voice, their first house search was over. There hadn't been anyone inside, alive or dead.

The four of them went back outside, and Kino sprayed an "X" on the gate, to mark that they'd already checked it.

They checked the second house in the same way. No one there.

And then — on the seventh house.

"Contact!"

The officer shouted as he immediately backed out of the wide living room. The policeman, Kino, and the soldier followed behind him in order to get a better line of sight.

There were "living dead."

Standing on the opposite side of the living room in front of the door to the next room were a man and a women, both in their forties, and a boy of about 15.

The three of them stared in apparent confusion at the living humans for a second.

But only for a second.

They swung their white eyes around and opened their jaws wide. Four flashlights fell on their gaping mouths, dark with blood and rank with rotting flesh.

The bodies each took a step forward.

"Uraaaaaah! Dieeee!" the soldier shouted, and the "living dead" ate a synchronized volley of shells, instantly becoming a head shorter. Everything above their necks was blown away.

"Stop!"

The sound of the officer's order, and then the sound of spent casings being ejected. The light sound of the casings hitting the ground, and then the heavy sound of crumpling bodies.

In a moment, the room went from a deafening racket to utter silence.

Tap, tap, tap. There came the sound of flesh on liquid.

"What?" The policeman's eyes darted around the room. Finally, he crouched down, and he found it. "That's it, huh?"

He stood back up and told them to look, one by one, to where he was pointing. They did as they were told and confirmed it for themselves, the military officer first, and Kino next.

Lastly, the soldier looked.

..

Tap, tap, tap.

There were "babies" clinging to the necks of the three fallen bodies.

They couldn't tell whether the babies had walked in from the other room or whether they had been down there all along, but there were five "living dead" babies. They were still too young to walk, so they crawled their way closer to the bodies on the ground.

And then they licked eagerly at the blood pouring from the dead bodies.

[illegible]

"Uuh... Uaaaaaah!"

The soldier fired. Still squatting, he shot and pumped, he shot and pumped, he shot and he shot and he shot again.

The babies were struck by nearly all of the shots, and they were scattered, literally blown away. Half of the living room had been redecorated with bright red blood and gore.

One last baby had only been hit on its lower half, so the upper half of its body still remained. The blasts had thrown it high into the air, and it hit the ground with a splat.

Slither, slither, slither.

Probably still bloodthirsty, it began to drag itself forward with its arms.

"Uuh..."

The soldier couldn't find any words in the moment. Taking careful aim at the head, he fired.

Asdf

"Hah... Hah..."

Having emptied his shotgun's magazine, the soldier rose unsteadily to his feet. He turned to look at the other three, who had been keeping watch during his rampage. He flashed them his canine teeth and yelled, "What are you guys doing?! You're supposed to shoot them!"

"Whoa, calm down. We just decided your shooting was sufficient for all of us." The policeman spoke calmly as he loaded rounds back into his shotgun.

"Okay then, let's go onto the next one! I'm gonna blow up every head I see!"

As they stepped out of the house that now reeked of blood, the officer whispered in Kino's ear, "I want you to watch that youngster closely for me."

Asdf

And so —

Kino and the others entered each house. If there wasn't anyone or "anything" to be found, they left. If there was, they fired only as much as was necessary, and then they left.

They did this over and over, repeating it like a simple chore.

Once the "living dead" were discovered by Kino's group, they stumbled closer in order to bite them.

Then the four of them would beat them to the punch and accurately blow their heads off.

By the time they had finished searching about 30 houses, the wind had picked up and blown the clouds away, letting the sun peek through.

"We've killed 57 of them. That's plenty. Let's head back for now," the officer said, as they stood in a large street intersection, a fair distance from the wall. The policeman counted their ammo supply at 2/3 of what they had started with.

"That's plenty! We can still keep going! You guys aren't tired yet either, right?" the soldier countered.

The policeman replied softly, "Yeah. That's why we're going back."

Kino gave a brief, "Understood."

"... Oh fine. I still haven't had enough yet though!" The soldier conceded as he topped off his shotgun.

"Watch out! — This could be trouble."

The officer's voice cut through the air, and soon the others saw why.

The "living dead" had crept out onto the empty street, and their numbers were still increasing. North, south, east, west; they appeared on the streets in each direction, even the way back toward the wall.

They were still a way's away from the group of four, but they were advancing. Slowly but steadily.

[They came out along with the sun. Requesting support fire. Aim north from the south side and south from the north side. Cross fire over our heads so we don't get hit. Call up the snipers that are covering different angles too.]

[Roger. We'll do what we can.]

As soon the response came over the radio, they heard gunfire coming off of the wall-top. The shockwaves crackled in the air as the bullets went whizzing over their heads.

However, there were still more than enough pouring out of the houses to replace the ones that had been shot down.

"Did they plan on ambushing us?! They just had to swarm us, didn't they!" the soldier yelled.

"Or maybe we finally ticked them off? We did wipe their buddies out, after all," the policeman quipped.

"..." Kino didn't say anything, but she grabbed a handful of buckshot shells out of the officer's rucksack and started shoving them into her jacket and pants pockets, since her pouches were still full.

Then she did the same for the other three, handing the shells out like candy.

"Good idea." The officer grinned as he stuffed them into his pockets.

As this was happening, the mass of "living dead" continued to grow. There were easily more than 100 now. And they were still increasing.

"What are you lollygagging around for?! We need to charge through them and hurry back to the wall! It's the only way!" The soldier already looked ready to bolt.

"That's a bad idea." "Bad idea."

Kino and the policeman responded at the same time.

The officer agreed, "They're right. We'll hold our ground here."

Each of the four roads leading to the intersection were teeming with tens of the "living dead." The snipers were slowly knocking them down, but the mob was already so dense that they could no longer see to the other end of the street.

"Do you think four people could just breeze through that swarm? You shoot one down and three more pop out from behind it, then what? Plus, if we try to break through, we lose our supporting fire. Let's avoid trapping ourselves like that."

"Then what's the plan?"

"Simple. Each of us defends one direction. They're still too far away for buckshot, but that's why we have a fighting chance. When I give the order, we all advance into firing range and pick them off one-by-one. Match their speed and back away slowly as you shoot. That's it."

"Do, do we have enough shells?"

"You just said we had 'plenty,' remember? If you don't shoot randomly, I think we'll be okay. Just stay calm. If any of us fall, then all four of us are doomed. Come on, just pretend it's a game and go wild. You haven't had enough yet, right?"

"..." A large bead of sweat drew a line down the soldier's cheek.

"We may come from different backgrounds, but now our fates are intertwined! I'm counting on you to watch my back! Come on you men, let's wrap this up quick and go out for drinks!" the officer said brightly.

"You suggested it, so that means you're paying, right? I only drink the expensive stuff." The policeman cracked a laugh.

"I can't drink, so buy me something sweet instead," Kino said flatly.

"..." The soldier didn't say anything.

"Forward!"

The order went out and the four of them started walking.

They each turned in their separate directions to face the "living dead."

Asdf

"Looks like I got myself into a pretty dirty job, Master," Kino muttered, as she stepped up her pace.

The buckshot was short range. Kino jogged toward the throng of "living dead," who were eager to bite her and turn her into one of them.

She stopped once she was close enough to clearly make out the shape of their ears.

"Fuu." Kino let out of short breath and took aim at the closest "living dead," an old man in his sixties.

Then she shifted her aim slightly so that her sight overlapped with the forty-year-old woman behind him and fired.

Of the nine buckshot pellets, five smashed through the old man's head and the other four carved the woman's head off. The two bodies fell together, side by side.

Kino pumped the persuader, ejecting the spent shell and chambering the next one. Then she readjusted herself, focusing her sight on the next two.

A sniper's bullet roared through the air, flying past her and into one of the "living dead" at the back of the mob.

"Well, I guess this is still better than training with you."

Asdf

Kino fired. Then she loaded in another magazine.

Kino fired, and fired, and fired, and reloaded, and fired, and fired, and fired, and reloaded, and fired, and fired, and fired, and reloaded, and fired, and fired, and fired, and moved back a little, and fired, and fired, and reloaded, and fired, and fired, and reloaded, and took several steps back, and fired, and fired, and fired, and fired, and reloaded as she took two steps backward, and fired, and fired, and fired.

Steadily, methodically, she destroyed the "targets" in front her of.

The silver of the persuader's muzzle end was filthy and blackened with soot.

The persuader's barrel was overheating, and the heat shimmer made it harder to aim.

Kino wasn't even aiming anymore.

The "living dead" trampled over their fallen comrades, sometimes tripping in the process. They shuffled quickly toward Kino, as if to greet her, and once they were finally close enough to whisper something, Kino wedged the persuader in her shoulder and fired.

From that range, there was no need to aim. They took the shells full-force through the chin and fell backwards.

Asdf

From the walltop, the spotters and snipers offering supporting fire had a clear view of the four people on the ground as they pushed against the hordes.

Each of them was a single point, holding back a black landslide of bodies.

Looking through round binoculars, one of the spotters murmured, "They're like demons..."

Another spotter, looking from a different angle whispered, "One of them's being beaten back. Who is it?"

No one was able to answer.

The only person that knew the answer to that question was Kino.

Kino had been mindful of what was happening behind her as she fired, and she could see from a distance that the person opposite her was under heavy pressure.

At that point, Kino had slain almost all of the "living dead." There were only five still standing on her end.

Kino threw out a big wave with her left hand and pointed out the five that were left. The snipers read her signals and delivered a few precision shots.

Kino confirmed the two kills. "I'm leaving the rest to you."

With that, she spun around and ran at full speed, with the bullets still coming down over her head.

She ran back to and through the intersection. She looked out to her sides and saw that the two men there were piling up plenty of their own kills. Both of them still had several left.

She turned her attention back to what was in front of her.

The person under heavy pressure was shooting in a blind frenzy.

It was that soldier.

Asdf

"Uohhhhhh! Stay baaaaaaaack!"

The soldier screamed as he fired, missing the head and hitting an arm instead.

There were twenty bodies still remaining, all staring at the young man with their pure white eyes.

"Stay back! Stay back! Stay back!!"

The soldier gave the persuader a pump to load another shell, aimed, and —
Kachin.

"Ha—"

A single dry sound was all that came out.

The soldier didn't realize that he was already out of shells.

"Hah! Hah! Hah!"

Again and again, the soldier pulled the trigger.

Of course, no shells came out. And the soldier couldn't understand why.

At the same time, the "living dead" were closing in, step by step.

"Why! Why won't it come out?!" The soldier was tearing up as he yelled at his persuader

The closest of the "living dead" gradually stretched out its arms. It was a girl that was around the same age as the soldier, and she looked like she must have been a great beauty when she was alive.

"It won't come out! It won't come out!"

The soldier couldn't see anything past his tears as the hands grabbed onto both of his cheeks.

Asdf

"Ah..."

The empty persuader fell from the soldier's hands with a dull metal clank. Caught in the "living dead's" hands, he was brought face-to-face with its white eyes.

"..."

He wasn't crying anymore.

"Aah..."

With his eyes open wide, his face broke into a grin and his voice leaked out.

"I get it... I get it... Aah..."

The woman listened to his cries as she opened her mouth.

Her mouth was dark and filthy with someone else's rotting flesh, and she inched it closer to the soldier's lips, almost as if ready for a kiss —

Gachin.

The sound of teeth gnashing into empty air.

Kino grabbed the soldier by his collar and dragged him backwards. The soldier collapsed onto the ground.

Kino sent a shell flying over his head and through the hands of the "living dead."

She held the persuader with just her right hand.

The woman was left with no trace of her head, and Kino turned to face another one that had appeared on the right with its arms outstretched. Kino flipped the persuader over and whipped the butt of the stock into the "living dead's" face.

Teeth flew into the air as the thing fell face-up on the ground. Kino barely looked as she drew out "Canon" with her right hand and fired.

The skull burst open from the close range .44-caliber bullet, soaking the ground in blood.

Kino fired four of "Canon's" five remaining bullets at a pace of one per second. She clicked the hammer down with her thumb and squeezed the trigger with her index finger.

With each shot, another body fell.

The young soldier writhed around on the ground and screamed as each of the nearby "living dead" toppled, "Hyah! Hyah! Hyah! Hyah!"

"Excuse me."

"Guhh! ..." The soldier took a solid kick to the abdomen and fell silent.

Now that the soldier had quieted down, Kino flipped through his pockets and pouches for shells, which she poured into her persuader.

"Compared to Master's training — this is so, so much easier."

Kino went back to shooting up the approaching mob.

Once the officer and the policeman were finished with their ends, they ran over to find Kino next to the sprawled out soldier as she kept watch and took in the beauty of the townscape.

"Good work." came the voice of the officer from behind her.

Kino replied without turning around, "I'm tired — I want to eat something sweet as soon as possible."

Asdf

That evening.

After resting in her tent since they returned in the afternoon, Kino was called to the command center.

There she listened to the latest report, together with the officer and the policeman.

On final inspection, they had confirmed the "corpses" of everyone in the country. That is, there wasn't a single survivor.

Also, there was the next operations phase — that is, disposing of all of the corpses and beginning talks on how to rebuild the country.

"Men! This is all thanks to you! You did a fine job coping with unforeseen circumstances! Excellent work! You'll be rewarded greatly!"

"You honor me!" The officer saluted.

"I'd be glad to have some more vacation days once I get home." The policeman shrugged.

"Please give me something I can use on my travels or that I can sell," Kino requested.

The three of them were dismissed, and as they went to leave, a voice called out to them, "Ah, that's right. The soldier you fought together with seems to be feeling much better now."

"Why don't we go cheer him up?" the officer suggested to the other two.

Asdf

The policeman declined at first, but the officer insisted, and the three of them made their way over to the medical tent.

Several cots were set up inside the tent, but there was only a single patient.

When the soldier saw the three people enter, he shifted his blankets and slowly sat upright, wearing a t-shirt.

"..." He didn't say anything, just stared at the three of them. They couldn't tell whether his eyes were empty or just at peace.

"Looks like you're alright now. Good work out there."

The soldier gave no response to the officer's gentle words.

The policeman remained silent. As did Kino.

The officer relayed the debriefing they had just heard to the soldier, finishing with, "It was a victory for all of us. Don't you agree?" He grinned and extended his hand for a shake.

The soldier didn't take his hand, but he did reply. "Victory? — No."

"Hm? — Why not?"

"I lost. We lost. All of humanity lost. Every single one of us lost."

"..." The officer glanced at Kino and the policeman.

"..."

"..."

Neither of them said a word, and the officer turned back to resume what was apparently his duty as spokesperson.

"But still, we did well. We were a ragtag group of strangers, but we still managed to work well together. I don't think I'll ever forget what we did today for the rest of my life."

"For the rest of your life, huh..."

"That's right. Until the day I die."

The soldier said rigidly, "I won't talk about today to anyone for the rest of my life." With that, he laid down on the cot and pulled the sheets over his head.

Asdf

"After that, he wouldn't reply to anyone. It seems like he might even turn down a reward or a promotion."

"I see."

Kino and Hermes looked out at the sea as they rode.

It was the next day after Kino's shooting spree inside the country.

Kino had agreed to help without hesitation, but now that her three day "stay" was over, they returned to traveling once the morning came.

For her reward, Kino helped herself to engine fuel, portable rations, bullets and gunpowder for "Canon," as well as anything else she might need in her travels.

As for the country, the few escaping survivors hadn't yet decided whether to try to rebuild it, leave it as it was to serve as a graveyard, or demolish it entirely.

Kino and Hermes left the country far behind them, until the walls were no longer visible where the blue sky and the green earth met on the horizon.

"Hey Kino," Hermes asked from below, "About that soldier. He came into direct contact with the 'living dead,' wasn't he?"

"Hm? Yeah, that's what I saw. He was ready to be bitten and too overwhelmed to shoot. It's good I made it in time."

"Hmmm... So maybe I was right..."

""Right'?" Kino made a puzzled expression beneath her goggles.

"Okay, Kino. What I'm about to say has absolutely no evidence behind it. It's just a made up story. Fiction. It's nonsense, okay?"

"...Sure." Kino's face grew more curious and more confused as she continued to ride.

Hermes spoke plainly, "That disease wasn't a disease at all. Getting infected by a bite, dying, and then moving around again; sure, a disease sounds like an easy explanation."

"...And?"

"Those people evolved beyond humans, Kino."

"..." Kino eased off the accelerator, letting Hermes run on inertia for a bit, and then she cut the engine.

Sitting on the grassland road, staring out at the calm sea, Kino asked Hermes, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It was some kind of plan or system to make humans reach the next stage of

evolution. The people that got their hands on the system became inanimate, as if they were dead, and then they evolved into 'advanced lifeforms.' Alive, but without the limitations of a physical body. Then they could use their brains at maximum capacity and form a mental link with each other. A world of spiritual fulfillment, without starvation or aging, something close to Heaven. Forever."

"Hermes, I kind of want to stop and ask what you're getting at — but let's hear the rest."

"Thanks. So then those people were so excited about the incredible system they'd created that they immediately wanted to increase their numbers. They wanted to shed everyone of their crippling humanity and invite them to higher existence. They wanted to show their wonderful world to as many people as possible. So — they bit them."

"...And?"

"They didn't need to eat. Their skin was white with small green spots, right? That was algae. It's efficient at taking in sunlight and converting it into energy. As long as they had some water and some time in the sun, their bodies wouldn't rot. At least until their brains were blown up."

"...So what about after?"

"They had a way of absorbing their friends in case one of them was destroyed by an external force."

"Absorbing...? You mean...?"

"Yeah. If someone's body stops moving, eat it. Even if it's in tiny pieces, as long as they ate it, they could save the connection. I guess you could call it 'becoming one.' Multiple individuals could become one individual and continue living."

"...What else?"

"If they were left alone, they would have eventually left their country, in order to spread their wonderful world. From there, they would grow again, and grow, and grow. At some point it would be impossible to stop them."

"Until eventually they'd cover the entire world...?"

"Exactly. Then every human in the world would have evolved into truly happy beings. — I know that was a wild explanation, but that was the plan. Maybe it was planned a long time ago and buried deep in the ocean."

"...Hermes."

"Yes, Kino?"

"That was an interesting story, but there's no proof for it, right?"

"Yep, that's what I said."

"Right."

"Oh, one thing I forgot to mention. Right before you get bitten, when you have skin-to-skin contact with one of them, you get a glimpse of how wonderful their world is. Like a free trial. After seeing and knowing that, no one would refuse getting bitten. Instead, they'd want to get bitten."

"..." Kino was silent for several seconds before asking Hermes, "I have one more question, is that okay?"

"Go for it."

"If I was turned like that — I wouldn't be able to ride a motorrad anymore, right?"

"Obviously not."

With that prompt response, Kino gave a satisfied nod and started Hermes's engine.

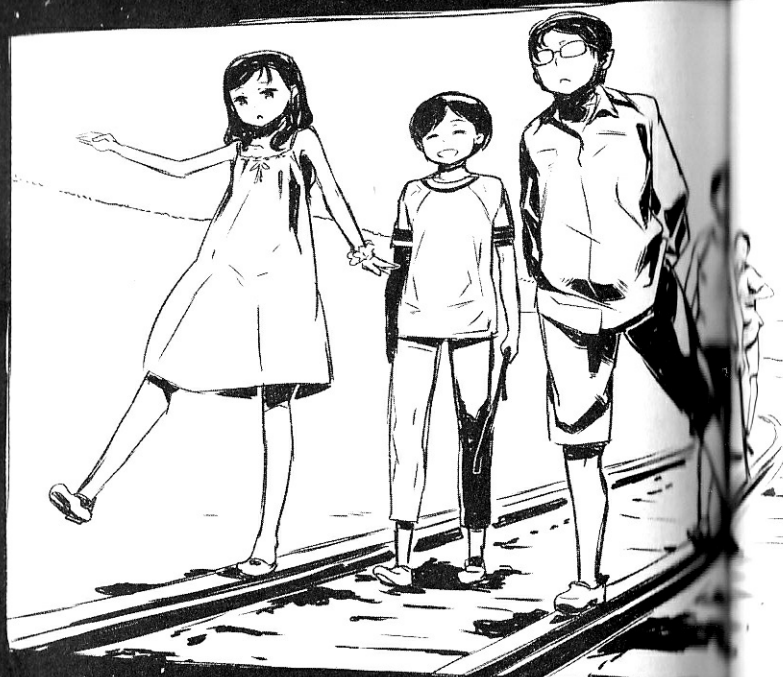
"Let's go on to the next country, Hermes."

"Let's go, Kino."

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ The phrase Sigsawa uses is actually "the number of red flowers increased." In Japanese folklore, the red spider lily is said to grow near graves and are an omen of death.
2. ↑ The literal text here is "it'll rain pitchforks." It's more commonly used

as "even if it rains pitchforks", that is, "no matter what misfortune happens."



第二話

「育てる国」

— Stand by me! —



A Nurturing Land —Stand by me!—

My name is Riku. I'm a dog.

I have long, white, fluffy fur. My face makes me look as if I'm always happy and smiling, but that doesn't mean that I am. I was just born this way.

My master is Shizu. He is a young man who always wears a green sweater, and who has been traveling by buggy ever since he lost his homeland due to complex circumstances.

Traveling with us is Ti. She's a quiet girl with a fondness for grenades, who has been part of our team ever since she lost her homeland due to complex circumstances.

—

Pshhhh, the sound of rushing water continued. Boom, came the muffled sound of an explosion.

A two-meter high column of water gushed up from the water's surface, raining droplets down all around it. Our prize was caked in mud and stunned from the pressure, three big fish.

"Got 'em," said Ti from the riverbank, satisfied with her grenade throw.

Master Shizu, who had been on standby downstream, nimbly reeled the fish in with a large rod.

For Ti, this method of fishing with hand grenades was always exciting.

For countries, blast fishing was illegal, as it is by no means gentle on the river or on the fish.

But since fishing isn't one of Master Shizu's strong points, this method certainly beats enduring and waiting for him to catch something (and there are plenty of times when he can't catch anything).

We stood on the bank of a wide river that lazily flowed through the middle of a vast prairie.

It was shortly before nightfall.

This was where we had decided to make camp for the evening, as well as a place to gather provisions.

The spring sky was perfectly clear. Not a cloud was in sight. The temperature was cool, but not enough to make you shiver.

After a round of blast fishing, we brought the fish we'd caught back to camp. It was just a short distance from the road, with the buggy parked nearby.

Master Shizu used the gathered up dead wood to build a fire and then began cooking the fish.

He gutted the fish and sliced them into multiple fillets, frying them on a pan à la meunière. It was only seasoned with salt and pepper, but it was still tasty.

For travelers, anything other than portable rations is an extravagant dinner.

Neither of them said a word, although that's normal for Ti, as we finished our meal. I was no exception.

Dusk was falling now, and a deep shade of blue was starting to dye the eastern end of the sky.

Master Shizu used what was left of the fire and fish to prepare tomorrow's breakfast. He dumped the remains into the river to be fish food.

"..." Ti was next to Master Shizu, watching in silence.

Behind them, two tents were happily propped up beside the dusty buggy.

It was the same, everyday traveling scene, but I'm sure Master Shizu was thinking.

Thinking that it couldn't go on like this forever.

Master Shizu wanted to be of service to someone. He wished to settle down

somewhere that he could call his second hometown, somewhere he could help people.

Unfortunately, we still hadn't come across a country that Master Shizu felt was deserving of his service and also willing to accept outsiders. Maybe we had bad luck or maybe people were wary of Master Shizu. Maybe both.

It was still the same after we met Ti and she came with us.

Well, there were a few countries that would have accepted just Ti, but each time, she firmly refused.

Keeping in mind Ti's education, it's obvious that it would be best for her to settle down in some country. However, it can't be helped that she hates the idea.

Ti doesn't seem to hate traveling at all though.

I can understand how for her, seeing varying scenery from the buggy and occasionally staying in countries would be fun in its own way instead.

Honestly, I'm fine either way.

I don't care where I am, as long as I can follow Master Shizu and watch over his way of life.

So in the end, the only one worrying and fussing about is Master Shizu.

—

The next day.

We had continued driving down the same riverside road, when halfway through the afternoon, we stumbled upon a country. It was neither large nor small.

So, would this country be willing to take our group in as residents?

After the inspection at the border wall, Master Shizu asked the examiner. "Would immigration be possible? And if it were possible, what procedures would need to be followed?"

He asked this question every time we entered a country, and the answer was

always one of two possibilities.

The first was no, they refused.

The other possibility was, "I don't know the details, and I don't want to give you a careless answer, so you'll have to go ask at the relevant government office." This time, the response was the latter.

We passed through a side door in the gate and caught sight of the country.

Aside from large geographical features like lakes or wide valleys, the country's makeup was more or less the same all-around.

That is, the outer regions of the country were farmland, forming a ring shape. In the center was the residential area, and in the very heart of the country was a collection of business and government buildings.

This time would be the same. The buggy drove down the road that ran through the extensive fields.

Out in front of us, a group of buildings was vaguely visible. Master Shizu gave an explanation to Ti, who sat in the passenger seat with her chin resting on my head.

"The level of technological progress varies from country to country, but they must have an understanding of civil engineering to make buildings like this. They didn't have it here, but some countries have computers at the inspection station, meaning that they've advanced beyond electricity."

"..." Ti was silent for many seconds, looking deep in thought, before she asked, "What about countries, with bombs?"

"Umm..." Master Shizu replied, uneasily.

—

The next day.

We left the hotel and went over to the immigration office.

What we learned was, "If you join a family here, permission will be granted promptly, but otherwise it's not normally possible."

The most obvious way to "join a family" was to marry a citizen.

Outside of that, adoption was another option.

So unless Master Shizu could find a fiancée and Ti could find an adoptive parent soon, it wouldn't be possible to live here.

We left the immigration office.

Even if we took an extended stay in this country, we wouldn't stand to gain anything. Instead, we did what trading we needed to do to continue traveling.

After that, we ate lunch.

We picked a restaurant with tables that extended into a park, and ordered food we wouldn't be able to find on the road.

Deep-fried foods weren't easily workable while traveling. Cooking with such a large amount of oil is wildly inefficient, after all. It always comes down to stewing and roasting.

It was the same for the sugar and ice necessary for things like cake or ice cream.

Master Shizu and Ti ate crispy fried pork and cheesecake with blueberry ice cream on top.

Ti eats tasty things very single-mindedly, making her easy to read.

"Tasty, huh?"

Master Shizu's question was hardly necessary.

Throughout our meal, the restaurant's speakers played a steady stream of movie promotions. Announcements for new movies, announcements for new showings of old movies.

We saw a lot of billboards across town too. It seemed clear that the most popular form of entertainment in this country was film.

While sipping tea after lunch, Master Shizu muttered absentmindedly, "Movies... I don't think I've seen one in years..."

The last time he saw one was probably in his hometown.

"What do you say? Going to see a movie would help educate Ti too," I proposed, offhandedly.

"Hmm..."

Master Shizu glanced at Ti, who was holding her cup with both hands and gulping down tea.

When she noticed him looking, he asked her, "Ti. Do you want to try watching a movie?"

"What's a 'movie'?"

"... Umm..."

Master Shizu paused in serious thought.

When you think about it, trying to explain a "movie" to someone that's never heard of the concept is quite difficult.

"Basically, you watch moving pictures on a big screen. Oh, a screen is — A drama is a fictional story that's performed for people to enjoy —" and so on, as Master Shizu continued his hectic explanation.

Ti sat and listened in silence.

Master Shizu finished, "So basically it's a sort of entertainment like that. Do you want to try watching one?"

She replied, "Don't need fiction. Traveling, seeing different places and people is, more fun."

—

After finishing our meal, Master stood from his seat and quietly asked me, "Did you notice, Riku?"

I noticed. For a while now, there had been a man secretly taking pictures of us with a small camera.

He was short. He wore sunglasses and a low-brim hat, making it hard to tell how old he was.

He sat at another table, pretending to read a newspaper and taking pictures

of us behind Master Shizu's back. His movements were nimble, but he had taken so many pictures that it was impossible not to notice.

"Yeah. Maybe he does field work for the government?" I asked.

There were many countries that didn't trust outsiders, so they'd allow travelers in but secretly monitor them. We weren't planning to overthrow them or anything though.

"I don't think so. I don't see anyone here that looks like they could do anything to us. And also —"

"Also?"

"He's really bad at hiding it."

"I see."

True; a government agent would be a professional observer, not this bad.

"In any case, we'll be leaving in the morning."

Ti was already walking away, and Master Shizu went to catch up to her.

I followed them.

After walking for a bit, I turned to look back, and the man was gone.

I wondered what it was he had wanted.

—

The next morning, we understood.

It was just after he had checked out of the hotel, as we stepped out of the lobby.

"Wait a second! Travelers! Waiiitttt!"

A female voice echoed out, shrill enough to shatter glass, and the voice's owner came charging at us from the foyer, stopping us in our tracks.

A woman in her forties. Coming up behind her was a man around the same age.

"Oh good! Just in time! Please! L-listen to what we have to say!"

"Yes! Please! Haah..."

"What is it?" Master Shizu calmly asked the two people that were panting in front of us.

We had no clue what they might need from us travelers right then, but still, the kind Master Shizu chose not continue walking, and instead guided the two to a sofa in the otherwise empty lobby.

The two of them thanked him as they sat, and we sat down as well across from them.

"..." Ti sat and waited in silence. She was probably thinking, "This has nothing to do with me."

But she was wrong.

They introduced themselves as a married couple living in this country.

"We'll be frank. Please let us adopt that pretty girl with the white hair!" they blurted out.

"Adopt Ti...?" Master Shizu let out, sounding curious.

"So her name is Ti! How cute, like an angel!" the woman said. Was acting hyper her job? She continued, "I do beg your pardon, but an acquaintance of ours took pictures for us yesterday!"

Ah, the peeping tom. A piece of the mystery solved. But what kind of acquaintance was he?

"And he told us, 'There's an incredibly cute traveler girl here'! We knew at first sight! We just have to raise this child and make her happy!"

There was something strange about this couple. But still, Master Shizu sat quietly and listened for the time being.

"Traveler, in this country, adopting a child will allow them to become a citizen! This girl ought to grow up in this country, comfortably and quickly! She ought to receive a good education and live a good life! Am I wrong?! I'm not, right?! She ought to quit such a dangerous, perilous journey immediately!"

She ended with a tone of finality in her voice. "Dangerous" and "perilous" are

the same thing. But I can't deny that traveling and danger go hand-in-hand.

"What do you say? It's settled, don't you think? This is the life that little Ti over here should live! We should go over the paperwork right now! Heck, we'll handle it all ourselves!"

It was so shameless, so incredible, that it felt refreshing to hear.

Master Shizu looked at the woman, who was ready to make the final push, and calmly responded, "First of all, Ti doesn't wish to remain in this country by herself. I can tell you that for sure. This has happened several times before."

At Master Shizu's words, Ti moved her head a few millimeters in a nod.

"Well!" The woman's counterattack was swift. "In that case, you can live here in this country too! Become my son!"

"What?"

"Yes, that's perfect! Both of you can become my children at the same time! Let's go with that! From now on you'll be brother and sister. Of course, you're already an adult, so I expect you to find yourself a job, a place where you can live happily and freely, and do whatever you like!"

"..."

Even pushiness has a limit, but — there was no sign of sarcasm in her voice. This would resolve Master Shizu's issues. For not, at least.

But in any case, who were these people? And why did they so desperately wish for children?

The simplest answer that came to mind would be that they couldn't bear children and so they wanted to adopt.

But I felt something suspicious about these people that said there was more to it than that.

"I think I'll need some time to think it over," Master Shizu said, calmly.

However, the response came immediately. "That won't do! How can you be so timid?!"

I don't think it was an issue of being timid, but I also don't think the woman

would have accepted that response.

"Come now, let's go to the immigration office! It'll be fine! You leave everything to us! We'll even pay the cab fare!"

Master Shizu looked at the woman, who was still yapping as she stood up, and shook his head no.

A moment later.

"Traveler! Don't listen to a word they say!" A younger woman's voice called out.

Master Shizu and I both turned to look. The owner of the voice behind us was a woman around 20 years old.

I don't think anyone would object if I said that by human standards, she was beautiful. She was pretty enough that when she was walking down the street, I expect all of the men would turn to look.

The others turned toward the young woman marching closer as well.

"You! What are you doing here?!"

"That's right! Go home! There's nothing for you here!"

The couple that had been yapping before were once again yapping, this time in a fit of anger. It seemed clear that the three of them were acquainted.

Master Shizu rose from the sofa to meet the young woman.

Then, he intentionally stood where the couple could hear him, and asked the young woman, "You seem to know what these two are after. Would you mind explainining?"

"Sounds good to me! Of course! Those two —" the woman pointed a finger squarely at the couple sitting on the couch, "just want a kid that's a movie star!"

—

Ah, so that was it.

The film industry in this country was booming. The acting business must also be booming.

And there would be demand for child actors. Oftentimes, those children's managers were their parents.

This couple had their eyes on Ti because she looked different from the other children in this country, with her white hair and green eyes. They had been pushing so hard to adopt a "daughter" so that they could put her in movies and turn a profit.

"I see..." Master Shizu murmured, as he turned to face the couple with a grin, "I understand your motives quite clearly now."

Was that irony or his honest impression? Or a bit of both?

So now who was the young woman that had come to warn us? As I was wondering, she offered up an explanation on her own.

"I've been in several movies since I was a baby! No, I was made to be in them! By those two! I was hardly able to attend school! — I never had a choice in the matter! They only gave birth to me in order to make money from it!"

I see. So she was the couple's real daughter. Come to think of it, their style of shouting was somewhat similar.

"Didn't we give you good memories?! You ingrate!" The mother's counterattack.

"Good memories'? Hah! Don't play pretend! I never wanted to be an actress!" The daughter's shout.

Master Shizu might have been thinking, "What a waste of beauty." I'm not sure.

"Oh is that so? You impudent child! Didn't you already cut ties with us a long time ago? Run along and go somewhere else!"

"Oh I will! I'm in college now! And I'm working to pay for it myself! I'm going to be a lawyer!"

I see. So her parents had taken all of her pay. She could win if she sued.

"I never wanted to see your faces again! But I can't overlook this wretched adoption plan!"

"You're a stupid child!"

"Hahaha! This feels great!"

"..." Ti sat in silence, listening to the mother and daughter fight and scream in the middle of the lobby. I have no idea what she might have been thinking.

Master Shizu didn't want to listen to them fight forever, so he interjected, "That's enough, both of you. — I won't be letting this couple adopt Ti."

"Ah, that's good..." The daughter said, putting a hand to her chest.

"Why not?! You'd kill her potential?! This girl could be a big star!" The mother seemed more than ready to start fighting again.

Leaving aside the greedy woman's desires, the conversation had reached its conclusion.

Or at least, that's what I thought, but this country wasn't done with us yet.

"Fine, then she can become my daughter!"

People must have overheard the commotion and were now gathered around us. One of them, an older gentleman, had been the one to speak.

With that, the other adults started chiming in too with their own candidacy announcements.

"No! Hold on! I want her to be my daughter!"

"I'll take her! She belongs in splendor, living with me!"

"Pick us! Come with us and become a famous actress! I'll make sure you have excellent lessons!"

"Wait wait wait, my place is the best! And I have business connections too!"

"My family could introduce you to an acting school!"

It was like watching a run on a failed bank.

It was like a dam had burst and now all of the nearby adults were flooding in to participate in The Ti Competition.

Nobody looked ready to start a fistfight, but the voices of people nominating themselves were met with booing retorts, making for an awful racket.

"Oh boy..." Master Shizu sighed. It looked like it was time to leave the country, as we'd originally planned.

Ti, who had been watching the whole time from the middle of the uproar, had only a few words to offer.

"Probably, more interesting, than a movie."

—

We gathered up our things, thanked the young lady, and left the hotel.

I heard a voice loud and clear from the lobby.

"Well, I guess none of us got her. I suppose that's a relief!"

Seriously, even honesty has a limit.

To my amazement, Ti extended a small hand out to Master Shizu as we walked.

Master Shizu noticed and squeezed her hand.

They walked to the buggy, hand-in-hand, and Master Shizu politely guided her to the passenger seat.

Then he stowed the luggage onto the buggy's rack and placed himself in the driver seat.

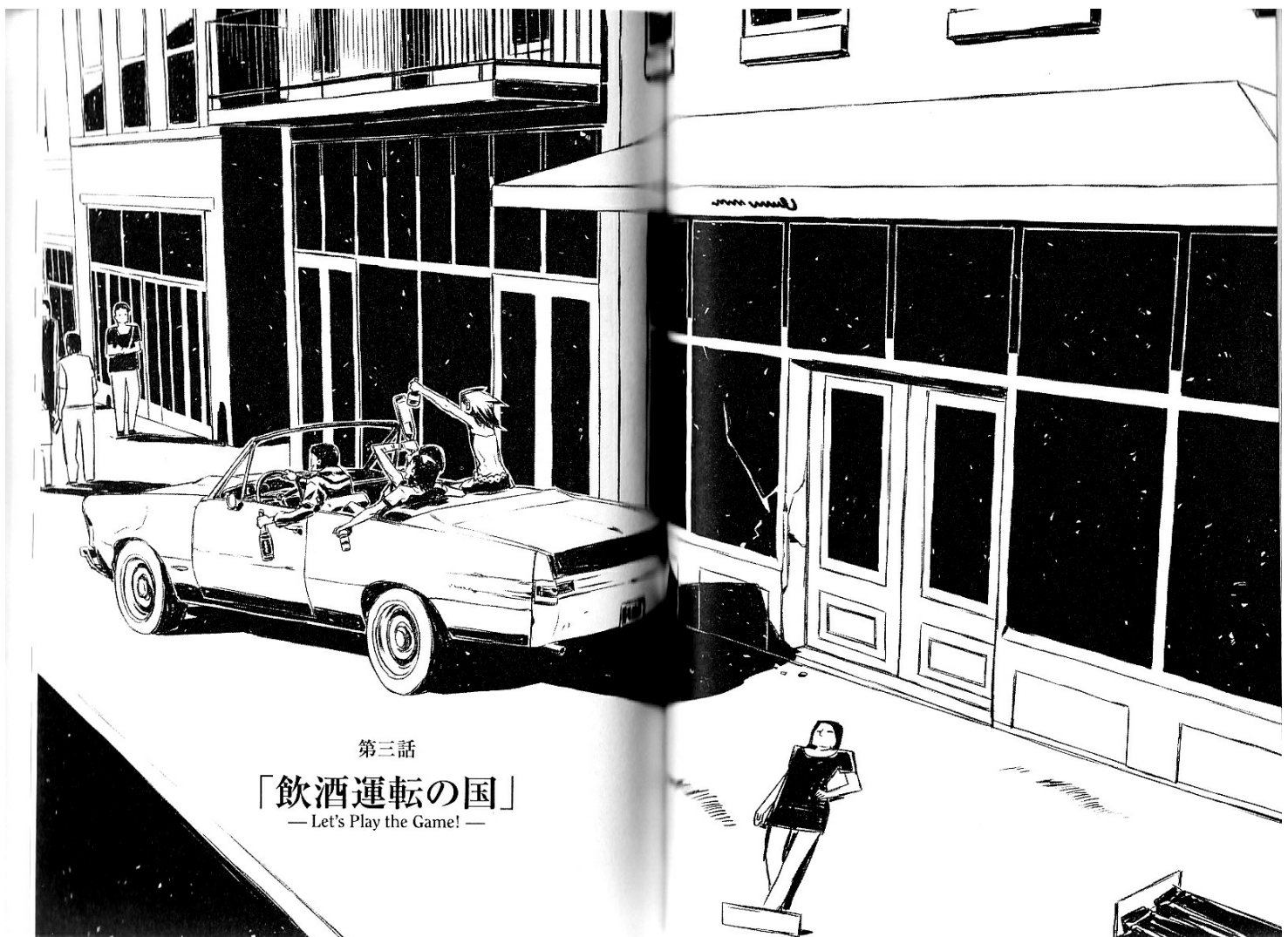
As I watched this unfold, I found it more brilliant than any movie scene, and then I quickly leaped into the passenger seat.

Ti put her thin legs on either side of me and rested her chin on top of my head.

"Let's go."

Ti gave the word, and Master Shizu started the engine.





Land of 'Drunk Driving' —Let's Play the Game—

A lone car was moving across the rainy plain.

The car was a small yellow mess.

The rain came down like a waterfall. The little car huffed and puffed along the straight road paved down the grassland.

The sky was very dark. Though the sun should have been shining from atop the world, it was nowhere to be seen.

A single windshield wiper was tirelessly pulling back and forth, but it was not doing a very good job of clearing the water. The rubber was worn out to begin with, and the rain was so heavy that the wiper could not keep up with the speed.

The roof of the car was made of fabric. On a clear day, it would be rolled up to turn the car into a convertible, but naturally, it was closed today. But the rain

leaked inside through the roof anyway.

“This rain is dreadful. Don’t you agree, Master?” Asked the person sitting at the right, behind the wheel. He was a slightly short but handsome man. Everything below the right shoulder of his brown jacket was soaked. He had already given up on keeping it dry.

“Days like this happen in life.” Replied the woman called Master, who sat next to the man. She had long, shimmering black hair, and it was difficult to tell how old she was. She was wearing a raincoat over her elegant black jacket to keep it from getting wet.

In the back seat behind them were travel gear and persuaders(including rifles). It was all covered under a tent to prevent water damage.

The man very carefully followed the nigh-indistinguishable road. If the road was not a line of brown in a sea of green, it would have been impossible to proceed.

It was unlikely that they would run into another car on the way, but the chances were not zero. And even if they were safe from other vehicles, the road might suddenly plunge into a river or be blocked by a fallen tree.

Very carefully, cautiously, and with utmost vigilance, the man continued the rainy drive, doing whatever he could to minimize the shaking.

The place they arrived at twice as late as they expected was a large city in the flatlands.

Paved roadways crisscrossed the country, and many of its citizens owned motorized vehicles.

The sky had finally cleared, and their little muddy car hobbled along underneath as much better cars quickly overtook them. They signaled, switched lanes, zoomed ahead, then returned to the lane.

“Excellent driving etiquette.” The woman noted.

In some countries, cars drove right up to them and overtook them without a care for safety, tailgated them, or even honked the klaxon for no reason. But none of that happened in this country.

“It’s certainly a welcome change. Gets rid of any unnecessary squabbling.” The man commented, lightly waving at the car that so politely overtook them.

Of course, if the other car had picked a fight with these people, it would have been the losing one.

Now, it was evening.

Parking their car in the lot, the man and the woman stepped into the hotel with one suitcase between them. As they checked in at the desk, a middle-aged patron came up to them with a smile.

“Hello there, travelers. I see you drove all the way here. Have you, by any chance, come to our country for some ‘drunk driving’?”

“‘Drunk driving’?” The man repeated quizzically.

“Ah, so you didn’t know, then? ‘Drunk driving’ is only the most popular pastime in our country! You drink alcohol and drive, then hit ‘people’ or ‘other cars’. It’s certainly worth a try!” The older man exclaimed. “Enjoy your stay!”

With that, he was gone.

“Huh?”

The man frowned. But his questions were answered as soon as he entered the hotel room.

There was a pamphlet there, with the following words:

[Try your hand at Drunk Driving! Drink and drive! Drink to drive! National Drunk Driving Centers are open every day of the year!]

The next day.

Though they were skeptical, a drunk driving center was something they had never heard of before.

So the two travelers went.

They drove their own car under the clear skies to a National Drunk Driving Center, which turned out to be a massive facility.

There was a vast tract of land before them, on the edges of the country. It looked almost like a village. There were paved roads and houses lining the

streets.

Upon closer inspection, they realized that, though the roads were real, the houses were intricate fakes like those used on movie sets.

“Welcome, travelers!”

Greeting them was a young woman in a suit, wearing a badge labeled ‘Guide’.

“Welcome to the 8th National Drunk Driving Center!” She said with a smile.

“So there are at least seven more of these facilities in your country.” The man noted. The guide nodded.

“Including civilian facilities of all sizes, we have twenty-four ‘drunk driving’ centers in the country.”

“Incredible.” The man replied, his tone somewhere between incredulity and awe.

“First, allow me to explain about the facility and ‘drunk driving’. A picture is worth a thousand words, so why not take a look?” The guide explained, leading the travelers into the tallest building in the facility—a lattice tower. After ascending about twenty meters on the elevator, they could see the entire mockup village at a glance.

It was about the size of four soccer fields. There were wide streets, narrow alleys, and traffic lights. On the sidewalks, they could even see plywood pedestrians.

“If you would turn your attention to the middle left and right.”

The travelers did as they were told. There were nearly a hundred cars parked in a massive lot.

“Those are the center’s vehicles.”

The cars were all normal vehicles of the same shape.

And each car was covered on all sides by thick metal piping. They were like sturdy birdcages, all dented or bent.

“And over there are today’s participants. We have a smaller group today.”

In front of the parking lot was a crowd too large to be called a ‘small group’.

There were at least several dozen. They sat around tables set up under a tent, drinking merrily. It was too far to see just what was in their cups, so the man decided to ask.

“Alcohol, of course. The participants drink to their heart’s content and raise their blood alcohol levels to acceptable levels, though not enough to harm their health. They have to meet a certain level before they can start their ‘drunk driving’.” The guide replied.

The participants seemed to be ready; after one final swig, they put on helmets and safety gear and climbed into their cars.

Dozens of cars started simultaneously in the lot. And when a loud signal sounded, they drove off at once. Soon the streets of the mockup village were bustling.

Then, traffic started.

It looked almost like another day on the road. But perhaps the alcohol was working; over one way was a car swaying down the street, and over the other a car was veering into the opposite lane.

When the traffic light turned red, the cars stopped as they were supposed to.

CRASH!

That was when one of the cars crashed into another. And as though on cue, a chain of crashes and bumps and scratches began to fill the village.

“Now they’re finally getting some ‘drunk driving’ done!” The guide exclaimed.

A car that was speeding along a street tried to make a turn, but messed up the steering; the tires screeched and it hit the sidewalk.

There were dry cracks as plywood pedestrians were sent flying like bowling pins. They flew through the air and fell into the middle of the road. Another car tried to swerve out of the way, but—

Crack.

It failed, and ended up running over the pedestrians, leaving behind only pieces.

The mockup village was caught up in a frenzy of noise.

One car tried too hard to overtake another and ended up crashing into a wall.

Another drove off the bridge drawn on the ground and ran down the river.

Another hobbled along toward a pile-up.

Another rammed into a sturdy, reinforced pillar.

“It’s certainly lively.” The man admitted.

“I understand. The participants *enjoy* this.” The woman said to the guide.

“Yes. ‘Drunk driving’ is our country’s most popular pastime.” The guide said, to the tune of cars bashing into one another. “Participants drink to their heart’s content, then drive around in the center. They can choose from two rulesets.”

The guide explained, citing the rules.

“First is the ‘safe driving’ ruleset. In this case, participants try to drive for as long as possible while causing the least damage possible. In other words, they try to avoid accidents and try to follow the rules. But that’s not easy, with all the alcohol in their system. They’re bound to bump into one thing or another. Although it doesn’t matter if another car were to crash into yours. This is the ruleset being used at the moment.”

The travelers seemed to understand. The guide continued.

“The second is the ‘destructive driving’ ruleset. In this case, participants try to drive as dangerously as possible. They crash into other cars as much as they’d like, and send ‘pedestrians’ flying. They let their desires control them and enjoy the destructive power their cars afford them. It’s the perfect pastime for stress relief. We have this event scheduled for the afternoon. It’s a little noisier.”

Then, a loud signal sounded.

“That’s the time limit signal.” Said the guide. The cars returned to the parking lot.

“The cars are all equipped with cameras, with which we check the drivers’ records. By the ‘safe driving’ ruleset, the driver who got into the fewest accidents, broke the fewest rules, and drove the longest distance is the winner.

It's the opposite in the 'destructive driving' ruleset. Drivers score points based on how bombastically they caused destruction. We have national tournaments for both. Our country is known for its alcohol, you see, and we have many drivers. That is why 'drunk driving', which combines both pastimes, has become such a popular sport among adults."

The drivers who returned to the lots got out of their cars.

When they took off their helmets, they all looked refreshed. Some were staggering as they walked.

"It's a rather violent sport." The man said honestly.

The guide smiled.

"What do you think? Would you like to give it a try, travelers? We give a special discount to first-time players. Everything from alcohol, side dishes, gas, and repair charges, for this low price!"

The travelers did not know if the price she suggested was a high one or a low one. But setting that aside, the woman spoke.

"I understand. But could I ask a question? Do drivers ever drink and drive outside the center—on public roads?"

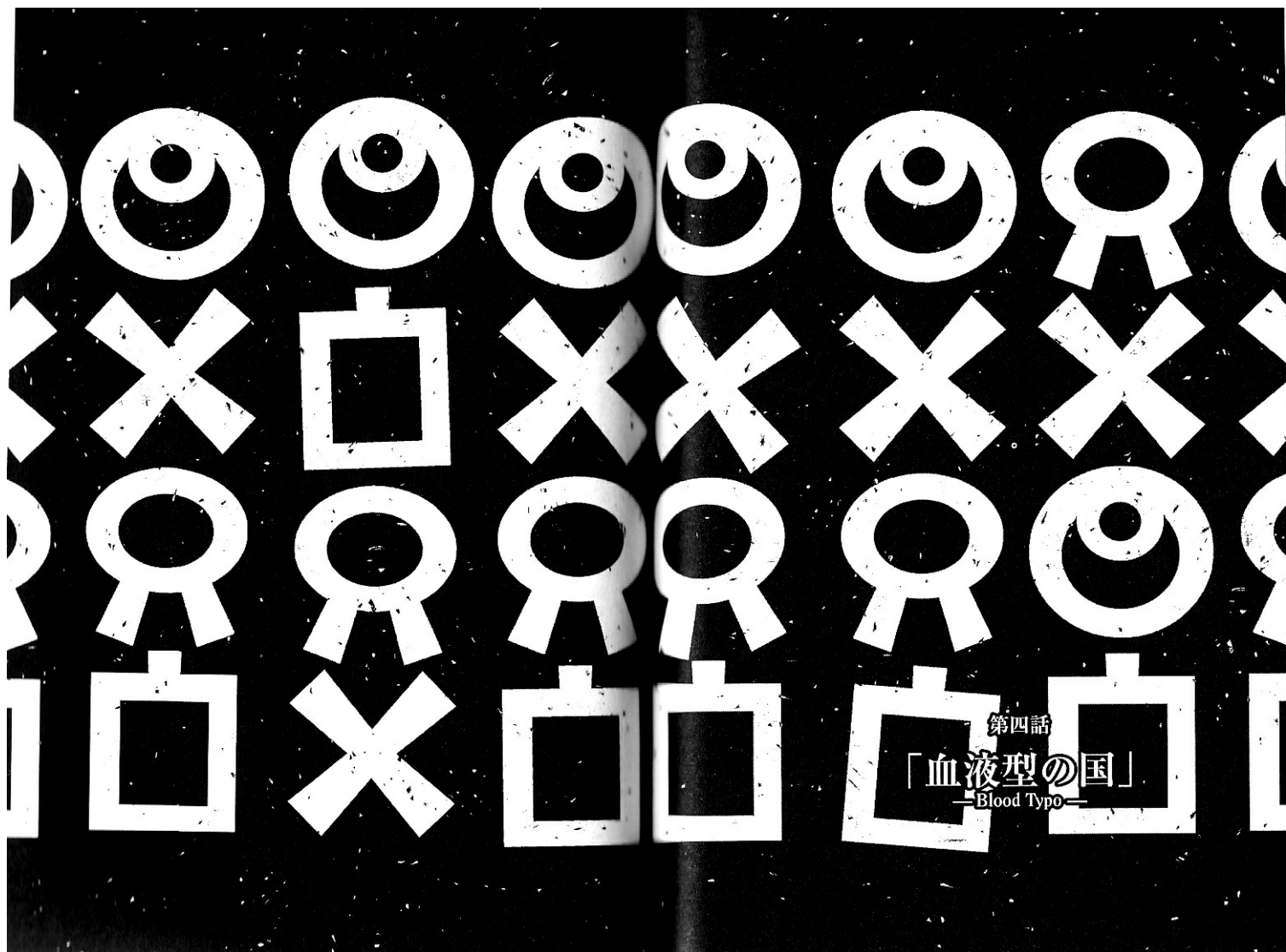
"Absolutely not!" The guide replied, horrified. "Who would do such a thing? Drinking and driving on public roads is a dangerous act that could easily end lives. When a driver is caught in the act, he or she is sentenced to ten years in prison. If someone is injured because of a drunk driver, the sentence is increased to twenty years. And if the drunk driver kills someone, he or she is naturally sentenced to life in prison, just like any other murderer!"

"I see." The woman nodded.

The guide smiled again.

"So, could I interest you in a round in our drunk driving center? We will naturally call a driver to take you to the hotel after the match. Just give it a shot! I guarantee that your stress will go flying after you crash into some cars and run over pedestrians."





第四話

「血液型の国」

—Blood Type—

Land of Blood Types —Blood Typo—

"Thanks for waiting, Kino! Your entry is approved!"

The border control officer's voice echoed out to Kino, who was sitting in a big, empty waiting room, playing a word chain game with Hermes.

Kino stood up and turned to look at the officer that had walked into the room.

"Great."

"Kino, you're supposed to start with 'e,' not 'g'!"

"That wasn't for the game. I meant entering."

"Entering. 'G,' hmm? G... G..."

Kino ignored Hermes's puzzlement and received the documents from the officer. Among them was a card made of plastic.

"This card is verification for foreigners. Everyone that's here on a temporary stay, whether for business or pleasure, must always have this with them. Information on Hermes and the persuaders you brought (Note: a persuader is a gun) are also printed on there. Please have a look over it to ensure all of the information is correct.

"Understood."

Kino glanced over the card.

First was a picture they'd just taken. There on the card was an unsmiling Kino.

The name field simply read, "Kino." The fields for middle and family names were blank.

Birthdate: "Unknown."

Hair color: "Black."

Eye color: "Dark Brown."

Possessions: "One motorrad and two hand-persuaders."

And —,

"Everything's correct. What does the 'Type 1' at the very bottom mean?" Kino asked.

"Ahh, well now that," the border officer's nostrils flared, "is your blood type! You weren't aware, Kino?"

Kino looked at the border officer, who seemed eager to explain, and answered truthfully. "I've heard that living things have blood types, and that there are a few differing classification systems. I know you have to be careful with the blood type when doing a blood transfusion, but that's about it."

"You seem pretty knowledgeable..." The border officer seemed quite disappointed, but he continued the explanation. "There are differing classification systems, but the most popular is the '1-2-3 Method.' There's Type 1 and Type 2. If you're in between, you have Type 3, and if you're neither, you're Type 0."

"I see. So you examined the blood you drew from me earlier and determined that I'm 'Type 1.'"

"Exactly. The citizens' ID always have their blood type printed as well."

From below them, Hermes said, "That's handy for quick blood transfusions after an accident, huh? That way you won't make a mistake."

"By the way, Kino —" the border officer said, trying to hide a smile, "Do people often tell you, 'you're kind of weird'?"

—

The country wasn't that large, but Kino and Hermes were stopped several times by citizens to talk.

"Hey traveler. What's your blood type? — Ooh, I'm Type 1 too. That means you've got a kind of laid-back personality, right?"

"Traveler, you have refined tastes, but more than anything, you enjoy eating a lot, right? It's satisfying to watch! You must be a Type 3 or a Type 1, am I right?"

— I am? See?!"

"Ah, traveler, thank you so much for keeping your room clean! You're a Type 2, aren't you? Oh, you're not? — Then you're Type 0! Oh? I know! Type 1! Just as I expected!"

"You have quite a good sense for this, seeing as how you picked this type of bullet. Your shooting instructor was probably a Type 3. Judging from where you put your holster, you must be a Type 1 or 2."

"Traveler, you're a Type 1?! Today's a bit unlucky for you, so be careful on the road! You should carry a brown handkerchief to protect you!"

"Ohh mann, I just got rejected. Shee's a Type 1, and she told me, 'I just can't date a serious Type 0 prude like you.' But there's nothing I can say to that, right? This sucksss!"

Each time, Kino said, "Oh, I see."

Hermes said, "I wish motorrads had a blood type too!"

—

The afternoon of their second day in the country.

As they rode through the town, Hermes said to Kino, "Look over there, on the right. What do you think made this country so crazy about blood types?"

Ahead of them, there was a banner hanging from a department store on the right side of the road that read, "Special Type 3 Promotion! We've picked out all kinds of clothing that fit Type 3s."

Kino redirected her attention from the banner back to the road and saw a bookstore.

"Who knows. — For now, I'm going to stop by that bookstore."

"You're going to go read books again without buying anything, aren't you?"

"Type 1s' are thrifty. Maybe."

Kino and Hermes stopped in the wide parking lot and Kino entered the bookstore.

The large bookstore was bustling with a number of customers.

First, Kino looked over the shelves that were set up near the door.

This is where they'd line up the best-selling books and the ones they most wanted to sell.

"Your Blood Type Changes Your Destiny!"

"I Know! How to Handle Dating Type 3 People!"

"What If My Boss Is a Type 2?"

"Buying a House? Read Me: Type 2 Version"

"Don't Look Down on Type 0s!"

"Recipe Book Series: Easy Cooking For Type 2 Beginners"

"What If a Type 1 and a Type 2 Get Married? Blood Lab"

"Common Mistakes For Type 0s. New Employee Version"

"How to Date a Troubled Type 2: My Special Secrets, Just For Type 0s"

"Guide to Buying a Car Without Mistakes. Type 2 Version"

"Don't Look Down on Type 3s!"

"Having a Type 3 Baby? Read Me."

"Beginning Gardening: For Type 3s"

It was a mountain of books related to blood types, of various sizes and thicknesses.

There were several people crowded around the mountain, and many who found something to take to the checkout counter.

One woman noticed Kino and went over to start a conversation. "Oh! A traveler, are you? Welcome to our country!"

"Thank you very much. — Out of curiosity, are all of the books here related to blood types?"

"That's right! What type are you? Wait! Let me guess!"

When she said that, the other nearby customers got involved too, all guessing

at Kino's blood type.

"Wait! Let me try too!"

"Me too. Traveler, don't tell us yet."

"I'm good at this!"

And who got it right, out of the seven people that tried?

"I knew it!" It was a middle-aged man with a wide grin on his face.

Kino asked them all, "I was wondering if you wouldn't mind explaining how this country became so interested in blood types."

All of them wanted to reply to Kino's question, but in the end, the woman that had spoken to Kino first spoke for all of them.

"Because of this, traveler!"

The woman grabbed a book off the shelf and handed it to Kino.

The book was relatively plain-looking and pocket-sized. More than anything, it was very thin.

The title was, "Categorizing Blood Types."

It really did seem simple in comparison to the other books.

The woman held the book to her chest as she explained, "About 20 years ago, the original copies of this book came to us from a traveling merchant. Even now, the copies available for sale are exactly the same except for the copyright notes. There were only five original copies, and they auction for extremely high prices. The most well-preserved copy is owned by the national library."

The young woman flipped to a page and showed it to Kino. "This book describes how to use blood types to determine peoples' personality in very simple terms. It's divided into four different sections, each describing personality and behavior."

The woman read a passage, "This is for Type 1. 'Honest, with a strong sense of justice,' 'somewhat bad at reading the mood,' 'warmhearted,' 'often has dexterous fingers,' 'excels at math,' 'slight distaste for sweet things,' 'bad at sensing personal boundaries,' 'seen by others as sloppy' —"

After the woman had read quite a bit, she shut the book closed with a snap. Then, "First this book got featured in a magazine! 'Trending in Foreign Countries, the Blood Type Book.' Everyone was surprised by how big a hit it was! Of course, this was before I was born, so I heard about it from my parents."

Some of the middle-aged people listening on the sidelines chimed in nostalgically.

"Ahh, it was so crazy, like a big festival."

"Like, that's what people mean when they say they've seen the light."

Kino said, "I see."

The young woman hugged the book closer to her chest and said, "Isn't it romantic? The blood that flows through our bodies also makes up our hearts and minds?"

Kino plucked a copy of "Categorizing Blood Types" from the shelf.

"Traveler, are you going to buy it?" a middle-aged customer asked, but Kino replied that she'd didn't want to spend money on anything not necessary for traveling, and she was just going to read it for a bit in the store.

"What? In that case, I'll buy it for you as a present! You can keep it as a reminder of our country, and read it on your journey!"

The other customers agreed that this was a wonderful idea.

Several of the customers offered to help pay, and eventually, Kino buckled under the pressure and received "Categorizing Blood Types" as a present.

"Well it's not too big we can't carry it anyway, so I thanked them and took it," Kino explained to Hermes, as they rode.

"Ohh? I see. Good thing it wasn't an encyclopedia!"

The next day.

Kino rose at dawn and left the country.

They ran carefully on the untamed offroad.

The beat-up, run-down path was set on either side by dense foliage. There was no fear of getting lost, but their field of vision was restricted.

In the afternoon, Kino ran into a traveling party.

They were several men and two trucks, making camp for the day in a forest clearing.

Kino brought Hermes to a stop and went to talk to the men. They were a group of businessmen and bodyguards that had come from a faraway land. They talked about the road they'd come on and asked about the road conditions on the way to the country Kino just left.

—

"It's pretty rare for travelers to be businessmen, isn't it? What do you do?" Hermes asked a young man, who looked to be in his twenties. He'd been assigned to escort Kino.

He made an uncomfortable face and replied, "I guess. We might be the only people in this line of work..."

"Which is?"

"We recover sold goods and swap them out... That is, 'defective products.' Orders from the president are that our company's pride can't allow for those to circulate."

"Aha."

Kino asked, "So what is it? If you don't mind me asking."

The man debated whether he should say before responding, "You can't tell anyone I told you. It's this."

Then, he took a book out from his pocket and showed it.

It had the same binding as the one in Kino's bag. "Categorizing Blood Types" was the title on the front.

"Hm?"

Kino and Hermes were both a bit surprised, although it wasn't visible in Hermes's case. The man put the book back in his pocket, without paying them any mind.

"We work for a publishing company, and we published this book. It was like 20 years ago. Back then, our president had just created the company, and this book was part of the publishing lineup at launch. It was written based on some doctor's research into using blood types to determine peoples' personalities, but well, it was nonsense and it didn't sell well. It didn't get reprinted after the first edition."

"I see. So... Why is that book a 'defective product'?" Kino asked.

"You see, there's a typo in the book."

"A typo... so one of the words is wrong?" Kino asked for confirmation.

"Yeah! The book lists four types, starting with Type 1 and ending with Type 0, and those different types list personality traits to go along with them, but —"

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Hermes muttered.

"Somehow, the order of the four types were in the wrong order!"

"What?" "Oh dear." Kino and Hermes responded at the same time.

Kino asked, hesitantly, "So you're saying 'Type 1' got turned into a different type in the book?"

"Yeah! Originally, the book was supposed to start from 'Type 0.' That's what the author put down. But I guess someone got it mixed up, and the printed book starts from 'Type 1' instead! So the entire book is shifted by one, and all of the entries are wrong! What's even worse is that it wasn't caught until after the release date!"

"..."

"My bad feeling came true."

"It didn't get a reprint, so all we could do was explain the error on advertisements and put leaflets into the books at stores. Well, like I said, they

didn't sell well anyway, so there weren't really any complaints."

Kino concluded, "But the book ended up getting exported."

"Yes. Right after the book came out, a merchant bought 20 copies and took them out of the country. Back then, the company was new and busy, so they gave up on trying to correct those 20 copies. But one day, suddenly the president said, 'That was the greatest disgrace of my life! I can't die in peace until they're all recovered and replaced!' — That was about 50 days ago."

"And that's why you're traveling to all these different countries."

"Right. The merchant kept a ledger, so we have a record of where he sold them and how many. Our job is following the ledger and replacing the copies we find with corrected versions. Honestly, I think the president's crazy. But hey, I get to travel and visit countries we haven't been in contact with, so it's kind of fun. Also, this next country is the last one. The records say there were five copies sold there. I wonder if they're still around...?"

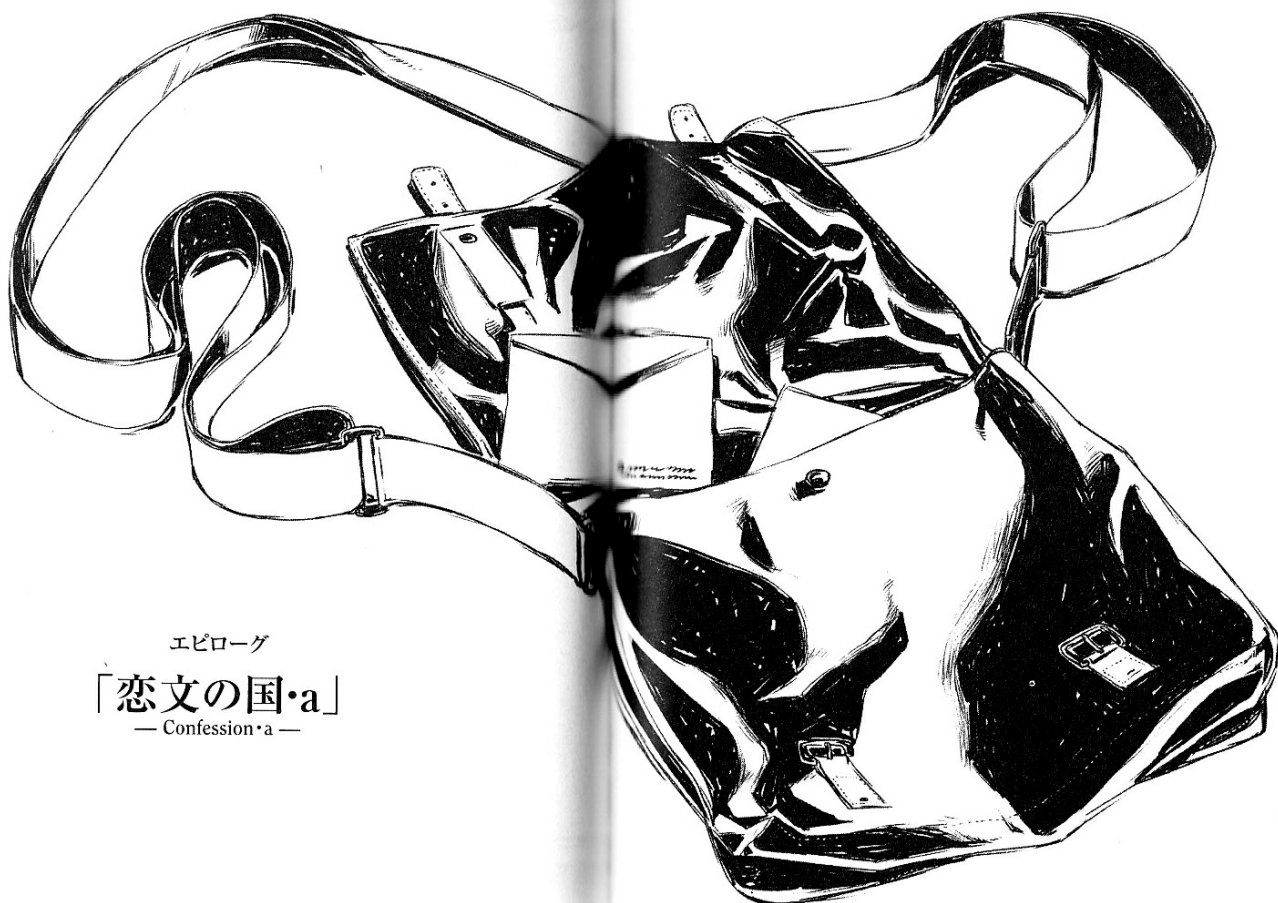
"..." Kino gave Hermes a look, without saying anything.

"Why not?" Hermes began, "Type 1s are 'honest, with a strong sense of justice.' Remember? "

"Hah..." Kino gave a loud sigh, and made eye contact with the man. "There's something I want you to hear. Not just you personally, but everyone, if possible."

The man gave her a smile, "Hm? You're looking serious — what is it?"





エピローグ
「恋文の国・a」
— Confession・a —

Epilogue: Land of Love Letters - a —Confession - a—

My dearest Kate,

How are you?

It's been two whole seasons already, but I'm finally writing to you for the first time since I left on my journey. It's taken me so long to get these emotions of mine under control.

I always dreamed of leaving our country's walls to see the wide, wide, world. So I learned all sorts of skills and studied all sorts of things, and worked hard to save money.

I'm sure you and the rest of the people back home must have thought I was being an idiot. You must have thought that I was wasting my time.

But I really wanted to fulfill my dream, no matter what.

And I did.

These days since I left have been wonderful.

Mother nature couldn't look more stunning, free from the country's walls.

I escaped death by the skin of my teeth because of bad weather.

I met all sorts of people in the countries I visited on my travels.

Good people, bad people, strange people.

I'm enjoying my life so much right now. I love each and every day I live.

But still, I guess I have to apologize to you. For leaving you all alone back home while I left on my journey.

I'm so sorry.

-With love

<=>

My dearest Kate,

Today, I saw the end of a country.

While I was traveling, I saw some corpses lying on the road. All of them'd come from the same place.

When I arrived, I found a little country that was cut off from their food supply because of bad weather. In the end, it had collapsed completely.

There were more bodies than I could count lying on the streets, covered in snow.

Even though this place must have been full of people's laughter before.

I'm sure none of them expected their homeland would one day become a graveyard.

I looked down at one little body in the snow and wondered what it meant to

live.

When you and I were that age...

We lived in our village, surrounded by our families. We had everything we ever needed.

I never thought death could come so easily.

And it never even occurred to me that a country could collapse.

I cried a little, in that deserted country.

And I thought of you.

I'm standing all alone in this cold place. But I'm alive.

And I still love you with all my heart.

I'll write to you again.

-With love

<=>

My dearest Kate,

It's summer again. I wonder if it's hot back home this year, too. The heat never really got to you, did it? I was always really bad with hot weather, though.

Right now, I'm in the highlands, three thousand meters above sea level. There's not much oxygen up here, and you can't call this temperature cool—it's downright cold.

And wait 'til you hear this—it's midsummer, but right now, I'm wearing a sweater!

I'm completely used to traveling now. I rise with the sun every morning, and fall asleep as the shadows grow like branches along the ground.

I miss those days we used to spend together, chatting and laughing in the bar until sunrise. We used to do so many stupid things when we were drunk. Remember how we made out on the bridge and ended up falling into the pond? I thought we were goners back then!

You know...

Back then, I thought those happy days would last forever.

I wonder when things changed?

When did I start to hesitate between leaving on a journey and marrying you to be with you forever?

I don't know the answer myself.

-With love

<=>

My dearest Kate,

I got told off really badly today. And it was your fault.

I'm working at a restaurant right now. I think the home cooking recipes from our village were pretty refreshing for the people in this country.

I made friends with the manager and chatted with her. Then I started talking about you.

You already know that my parents are gone, right?

So when she asked me if there was anyone back home waiting for me, I ended up mentioning your name. I told her, "I left on a journey, leaving behind the girl I grew up with and promised to marry".

When I said that, the manager got really angry with me.

"Never mind the food! Take off that apron right now and go home this instant!"

That was really scary. The other employees and the customers burst out laughing.

As we were cleaning up the place, the manager told me in a nostalgic voice.

She said that her lover left on a journey too, and that he hadn't come back yet.

She was running this restaurant so things'd be okay no matter when he returned.

I apologized to her. But she laughed and said,

“Save it for that girl of yours.”

I’m sure you must be really angry, too.

I’ll apologize as many times as it takes. I’m so sorry.

But I don’t regret leaving on this journey.

And I swear: one day, I’ll come back to be by your side.

-With love

<=>

My dearest Kate,

How are you?

I’m not doing so well right now.

To tell you the truth, I’m sick. It’s kind of a serious illness.

And I was always confident about my health, too...

But the heavens haven’t abandoned me yet! I got sick just before I arrived at this country. And the people here generously gave me treatment even though I’m an outlander. Medicine is expensive in any country, so this was like a miracle!

They told me that, for religious reasons, the people of this country live by the tenet of helping out those in need.

I was thankful. I was moved.

They’re all such kind and friendly people.

So I decided:

Once I get better, I’ll stay here for a while to help them. I want to give back to them for everything they’ve given me. I know there must be something only I can do!

So before that, I guess I’ll have to get better again.

-With love

<=>

My dearest Kate,

I'm still not in very good shape.

But the doctor promised me that I would get better.

Once I get discharged from the hospital and pay back the people here for their kindness...

I'm going to come back home.

To you.

Kate.

There are so many things I want to tell you.

I want to tell you about my journey.

And I want to talk with you about our future together.

But in that moment we see each other again, there's only one thing I'm going to say to you.

'I love you'.

That's all.

-With love

<=>

I feel

to

say

this

if

nothing else

“‘I love’? What about the rest?”

“That’s as far as it goes, Hermes. I think he must have been really weak when he wrote this last letter. All I can see are some scribbles that don’t really look like words.” Kino answered, showing Hermes the letter before neatly folding it

back up again.

She then meticulously placed the small pile of letters into a pocket at the bottom of a leather messenger bag.

It was a dark green leather bag, neither large nor small.

It was sturdy and completely intact.

Except for the tiny dents and scratches all over its surface.

Kino and Hermes were under the morning sun.

The summer sun shone down upon the plains, and Hermes, laden with travel gear, was propped up on his center stand next to a tree.

Kino stood leaning in the shade, against the large tree trunk. She was wearing her white shirt today.

Listening to the chirping of the birds flying to and fro between the branches, and looking down on the bag in her hands,

“Hm... What to do...”

Kino voiced her question.

“What do you mean, ‘what to do’? The guy who owned this bag—the guy who wrote those letters—is already dead.” Hermes said nonchalantly. Kino nodded.

“Yeah. This last letter is folded in a completely different way from the rest, and it’s not even in an envelope. Someone from the hospital must have cleaned up his belongings after he died.”

“And then someone snatched it and sold it off to a store that sells used stuff. Not that bad of a price for medical treatment.” Hermes said jokingly.

“If I’d known, I wouldn’t have bought this bag. What if I end up taking it to his hometown and running into someone he knew? What would they think?”

Hermes’s answer came immediately.

“‘Kino killed the man and stole his bag!’.”

“You think so too? According to the addresses written here, his hometown

was pretty close by, and it's on our way. It looks like he was traveling in the opposite direction as us."

"Then you have two choices, Kino."

"Which are?"

"First, it might be a really nice bag you really liked, but you can bury it. Second, you can go to that address once you reach that country and just give the letters to this woman named Kate. This guy says he was sick, so if you word it carefully, she won't think you killed him and took his stuff, Kino."

Kino mumbled in agreement. But she then added:

"I don't mind giving her the letters, or even the bag, as a memento of him. But..."

"But?"

"To be honest, I don't really want to make this Kate person sad. I don't want to make plans for something like that."

"Then choice number one it is." Hermes said without a care. Kino looked somewhat dissatisfied.

"But... I can't just throw these letters away. These were his last sentiments. If I can... I want to deliver them."

"Then how about you just hang the bag on a branch somewhere so it's easy to see? This tree's perfect for camping under, so maybe another traveler'll see the letters and deliver them to Kate. What one god tosses, another picks up."

"...I'm surprised you actually got that saying right."

"Well *excuse me*."

"Hm."

Kino thought for some dozen seconds before finally making a decision.

"Let's go. Although I'm no god."

They raced through the humid heat rising from the moist soil and the grassy woods.

“I wonder why he never mailed these letters. The countries in this area must have some sort of a postal system. And he even wrote out the address, too.” Hermes wondered.

“Who knows?” Kino answered, “I don’t think we’ll ever find out.”

“This is a pretty big country, Kino.”

Kino and Hermes were standing in the busy streets.

They had entered the biggest country in the region.

Many merchants frequented this country, which meant that shops and inns lined the streets from the vicinity of the walls onward. Clustered at the center of the country were high-rise buildings over thirty stories high.

“Let’s visit the address on the letter tomorrow. The town of Forsily in the western district, right?”

“I hope Kate still lives in that village.”

“Yeah. If we don’t deliver these letters to her, you and I are going to be the only ones in the country who know the whole story, Hermes. That sounds a little lonely to me.”

Kino rode along on Hermes.

Under the summer sky, dyed orange by the light of dusk, they drove between the other cars on the large street lined with fields.

Once they reached the central district, they found themselves surrounded by a veritable concrete jungle. Countless signs were decorated with gaudy flashing lights. Simply passing by made them feel as though they were looking at advertisements for all kinds of different products.

And in the midst of the sights and sounds,

“Look over there, Kino. It’s her again.”

There were signs decorated with photographs of a beautiful young woman.

She was a woman of around twenty, with long hair and elegant bearing.

She was advertising a wide assortment of products, from makeup to clothing, food, snacks, and home appliances.

“She must be really popular. I wonder who she is?”

“She’s a singer, Kino.”

“How’d you know?”

“That sign by the traffic lights.”

“...Oh, I see it.”

Hitting a red light, they came to a stop at a large intersection. There they had a great view of the sign hanging from the building on the street corner to their right.

The sign was the size of a house. A woman in a black dress stood before the setting sun, hanging her head ever-so-slightly with a melancholy look.

The tagline read:

‘A live concert at the National Amphitheater celebrating the release of the new album!’

Written underneath was a date and time still quite far away.

The words ‘Sold Out!’ were painted over the telephone number to be called for ticket bookings.

The singer’s name was not written on the sign.

“She must be pretty popular if they don’t even need to write her name.” Kino mumbled.

“Why don’t you try it too, Kino?” Hermes asked suddenly.

“What do you mean? Try what?”

“Why don’t you try your hand at being a singer? You’re pretty good too. You could wear frilly clothes and bounce on the stage like an idol.”

“Since when did you join a scouting company, Hermes?”

“I think it’s a pretty good idea. I bet you’d make a lot of money.”

“No thanks. I’ll do whatever I feel like.”

The traffic signal flashed back to green. Kino started off on Hermes again.

Having unpacked at the hotel introduced to her at the border, Kino stuffed herself at the restaurant and returned to her room, where Hermes waited.

“I’m back.”

“Welcome back.” Hermes replied. He was propped up on his center stand in the middle of the room, watching television. A showy liquor commercial was currently playing on the screen.

“Oh? I don’t remember turning on the TV before I left...”

“Welcome back, Kino. And don’t worry about details like that, or you’ll go bald one of these days.”

“I can’t have that happen.”

“Anyway, that singer is going to sing from the studios real soon.”

“Huh.”

Kino brought over a chair and sat next to Hermes.

Once the advertisements ended, a suit-clad man who looked to be the emcee began to speak, standing perfectly straight.

[Thank you for waiting, everyone! It’s finally the moment you’ve all been waiting for. A song from Kate Forsily’s latest album. <The One I Can Never Meet>.]

The scene changed.

The singer, wearing a black dress that almost looked like mourning garb, stood on the stage as she hung her head ever-so-slightly.

As the orchestra began to play the accompaniment, Kino turned to Hermes in shock.

“‘Kate’? Kate Forsily?”

“Yeah. That’s her name. Is this just a coincidence?”

“...”

Kino could not answer his question.

Back on the screen, Kate began to sing. Her voice was high, clear, and

beautiful.

It was an unhappy song.

A terribly sad song about the sentiments of a woman whose beloved had departed suddenly, leaving her despondent.

The next morning, Kino rose with the sun.

She did her usual exercises with all the persuaders in her possession, cleaned them out, and loaded their magazines.

She took a relaxing shower and filled her belly with breakfast. And then,

“Excuse me. I have a question.”

Kino began to ask around about Kate Forsily at the front desk and the hotel lobby. She asked both employees and other patrons, but not one of them did not know her name.

Everyone answered Kino’s question as though bragging about how much they knew about her.

Kino returned to her room and delivered this information to Hermes.

Kate Forsily.

She had just turned twenty-one years of age.

She had made her debut as a singer two years ago, and slowly gained popularity. She became the undisputed top singer of this country last year around this time.

She was known for always dressing in black, composing and writing the lyrics to her mournful and moving songs herself.

Unusually for a celebrity, she was extremely introverted and meek.

That had come as a refreshing change to this country, a place so full of vibrant energy, that it helped propel her to stardom.

Her gorgeous looks also led her to appear in many advertisements.

But perhaps she was afraid to stray from this image of hers. Although the record companies and her fans begged her to begin singing more cheerful love

songs, she had turned down their requests without a moment's hesitation.

This was why some believed that people would soon tire of her image and move on.

"I get it. But what about the most important part?"

"Don't worry, Hermes. I made sure to ask, 'Where is her hometown?'."

"So where was it?"

"Everyone told me. She's from—"

[Welcome to Forsily! Population: 2467]

Kino and Hermes were standing in front of a sign.

Kino was on Hermes, wearing a black jacket over her white shirt under the scorching summer sun. Hermes was not carrying any luggage, save for the two black boxes on either side of his rear wheel.

They were in the western district of the country. A lazy countryside view was spread all around them.

"All right. First off..."

Kino unfolded a scrap of paper with directions to the ward office. She traced the path with her eyes, and spotted the biggest building within sight behind a grove of trees.

"We'll go to the ward office and look up the address on the letters. If 'Kate Forsily' really does live there..."

"If she does?"

"What then? I doubt Kate Forsily herself lives there now. And I don't think she'd agree to meet us just because we came all the way to her house."

"Anyway, we'll worry about that later. Let's go check it out, Kino. Who knows? Maybe the Kate in the letters is a completely different person."

"All right."

Kino pocketed the piece of paper and started Hermes.

"She's not?" "She isn't?"

Kino and Hermes said in perfect unison.

The middle-aged man assisting them at the ward office replied,

“Not at all, I’m afraid. You two must have mistaken our Kate for the famous singer.”

“Oh... Um, well... Yes. We were curious.” Kino answered, not entirely untruthfully.

“So this is a different Kate, huh...” Hermes said. The middle-aged man chuckled.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but our Kate is named ‘Kate Faraday’. Although I understand why you travelers were confused; she’s the only one with that name, after all.”

“...”

Kino remained silent.

“Don’t the people in this country mistake this Kate for the singer and come to find her or anything?” Hermes asked.

The man laughed even more heartily.

“Hah! They did before, but not anymore. Everyone here knows that Kate Forsily’s name is a pseudonym.”

“I see.” “I get it.”

“It’s true she’s also from Forsily, but she only lived here until she was six years old. Afterwards, she grew up in the central district. She only comes back here a few times a year. And now that her grandparents have passed away, she has no reason to come back at all. After she became famous, we did mention to her that we’d like to make her an honorary citizen, but...”

“But?” “What happened?”

“She politely turned down the offer through a letter from a representative. ‘That’s too much of an honor, considering I only lived in Forsily for a short time. I’m sorry for using the town’s name as my pseudonym without permission’, she said. Even though *we’re* the ones who’re grateful for her name.”

“I see.” “Hm.”

“Honestly, we wouldn’t get many travelers in this village without misunderstandings like this! Since you’re here, why not take your time sightseeing? The view is magnificent, and we’ve got some scrumptious, newly harvested vegetables!”

“Of course. Thank you for your help.”

“Thank you.”

Once Kino and Hermes were gone,

“I can’t believe travelers really *did* come because of a misunderstanding like that...” The middle-aged man muttered, stepping into a phone booth at the entrance of the ward office.

Although there was a telephone at his own desk, he chose to make the call through the public line, using change from his own pocket.

Answering his call was another man. The man at the ward office said,

[A young traveler on a motorrad just came to the village, thinking Kate Forsily still lived here. Is this good enough of a report?]

“So the mystery is solved, Kino.” Hermes said as he drove along the road. Kino nodded, satisfied.

“I’m glad we decided to come. So the ‘Kate’ in the letter wasn’t Kate Forsily, but Kate Faraday. And here I was, thinking Kate became a famous singer after her boyfriend left on a journey.”

“I was thinking the same thing. But I guess that wasn’t it. Let’s go visit the real Kate!”

“Yeah. Although we’re not exactly bringing her good news.”

“But Kino! This is why we came to this country in the first place. What about your plans?”

“You’re right, Hermes.”

Kino and Hermes went to the address written on the letters.

The house was easy to find.

It was a single, detached home surrounded by vast fields.

There was a yard filled with plants and flowers. There was an archway overgrown with roses. There was a sign that confirmed the address Kino was looking for. There was a nameplate with the name 'Faraday' on the door.

"All right..." Kino said, propping up Hermes on his center stand. She took a deep breath.

"Oh my! A guest?"

At that moment, a woman's voice rang brightly from somewhere. Kino turned to find her.

A woman poked her head out from between the plants in the garden.

She was a chubby, gentle-looking woman in her thirties. She was wearing a bright blue skirt, and an apron embroidered with flowers. Her hands were covered with soil, likely because she was doing gardening work.

"Good morning, ma'am. I'm a traveler. My name is Kino, and this here is my partner Hermes. Your garden was so beautiful that we decided to stop to have a closer look."

The woman smiled radiantly at Kino.

"I'm flattered! It looks like all that work wasn't for nothing after all. But it's so unusual to see travelers so far out in the countryside. Would you like to come in for some tea? I was just about to get some rest. I'm sure my break would be much more fun if there was someone to talk to. Oh! Where are my manners? My name is Kate. Kate Faraday."

Kino,

"By all means."

Did not hesitate for a single moment.

Kino and Hermes were led into the parlor, a wide-open room next to the garden with a wonderful breeze.

Kino and Kate sat across the table from one another in wooden chairs. Hermes was propped up on his center stand beside them.

As usual, Kino carefully inspected the tea Kate poured for her before taking a single sip.

“It’s delicious.” She said honestly.

Kate spent a long time chatting about how she could brew delicious tea from the herbs in her garden.

Once Kate’s passionate discussion came to a close, Kino spoke up to fulfill the purpose of her visit.

“Ms. Faraday. This might be a bit sudden, but have any of your friends or acquaintances left this country to go on a journey?” She asked solemnly.

“Hm? No.”

Kate’s answer was simple and without a moment’s hesitation.

“None of my friends or relatives have ever left the country’s walls.”

“...”

Kino could not find the words to continue. But,

“Really? I guess not many people here leave to travel.” Hermes said, quickly shifting the direction of the conversation.

Kate answered just as nonchalantly as before.

“That’s not really true, either. Merchants visit our country all the time, and a lot of people are inspired by them to leave the walls. But I can’t do that myself, of course... More tea, Kino?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, please. So, has anyone from this town left on a journey?” Kino asked. Kate, refilling her cup, responded,

“I’m not sure. *Did* anyone ever leave...?” She wondered out loud, honestly unsure, “well, this might be a small town, but even I don’t know everyone who lives here. I’m sure it’s just my age. My memory isn’t what it used to be.” She laughed.

“...”

Kino said nothing.

“Hey! I heard there’s a famous singer in this country with the same name as you, Ms. Kate.” Hermes said. Kate replied,

“Oh, yes! Kate Forsily! I’m surprised you know about her.”

“It’s kind of impossible *not* to know who she is once you’ve stepped into this country.”

“She’s really very wonderful. I’m a big fan of hers.”

“We went to the ward office to look at the area map when we heard some things about her. She lived here when she was little and came back to visit a few times, right?”

“That’s right. I saw her when I was younger, too. I even played with her at the town festival! In this town, older kids usually take care of the younger ones, you see. Back then, she was a bit of a wallflower, but she must have grown so beautiful after she moved to the city. My entire family loves her!”

“Wow. I guess that’s a popular singer for you.”

“At first, some people got her confused with me because of her name! That was because she didn’t say that her name was a pseudonym back when she first made her debut. People ended up sending me fan letters and gifts by mistake! You have no idea how confused I was. How could they confuse a country bumpkin like me with a beautiful young lady like her? I’m sure she’d be upset if she knew. Ahaha!”

Kate laughed jovially.

“...”

Kino fell into thought. She thought for some time. But,

“What should I do...?”

“Hm? Is something wrong, Kino?”

“Oh! Nothing. I was just talking to myself. Just out of curiosity, Ms. Faraday, do you live here by yourself?”

“No. I live with my husband—we’ve been married for four years now—and our two children. I’m pregnant with our third right now, so next year, we’ll be a

family of five. They went out today to the pond to fish for catfish. I hope they bring home a whopper!”

After a veritable feast of tea and cookies, Kate invited Kino and Hermes for lunch. But,

“We’d like to sightsee around town some more.” Kino said, finally free from the talkative Kate.

She waved at Kate, who came all the way outside to see her off, and started Hermes.

“Is she the one? Or is she not?” Kino asked, wondering to herself.

With the bag and the letters still inside the black boxes, Hermes answered,

“I think she must be the one. This is the right address, and I just don’t think it could be someone else.”

“Then... Maybe Kate Faraday decided to forget her old boyfriend so she could move on? To live happily with her husband and children?”

“Maybe. From the looks of the ink, these letters can’t be more than five years old. But since he never wrote down any dates, we can’t say for sure.”

“Right. So we still have a mystery on our hands.” Kino said, driving Hermes slowly, “we’re... going off-track from our plans, huh.”

“Yeah.”

“In other words... maybe I could just keep this bag for myself, along with its mystery?”

“Well, maybe.”

“What about the letters? There’s no one to read them now.”

“Why don’t you burn them? Maybe his feelings will scatter and reach the heavens.”

“Maybe. I’ll consider it once we leave this country.”

Kino and Hermes slowly rode through the lonely countryside.

<=>

“Are you the traveler who visited the town of Forsily today?” Asked a suit-clad man, once Kino and Hermes had returned to the hotel.

Back in Forsily, Kino had chowed down on the local vegetables as the man from the ward office had recommended. She returned to the hotel at a meandering pace, once afternoon was past.

The hotel lobby was nearly empty. Kino responded to the thirty-something man.

“Yes.” She said simply.

“I’m sorry for approaching you so suddenly. Here.” The man took out a business card from his breast pocket and handed it to Kino.

Kino skimmed the card and held it in front of Hermes. On it was written the man’s name and his occupation. He was an employee at a record company.

“Wow! I wonder if he’s here to scout you, Kino. Maybe you’ll become an idol in frilly clothes and sing cheery songs to overtake Kate Forsily and her depressing songs!” Hermes said jovially.

“What? I’m sorry, but that’s not...” The man trailed off, extremely confused. He shook his head. “If you’ll give us a bit of your time. There’s someone who’d like to speak to you. I can’t tell you the specifics here, but this is very important—both for yourself and for this person. We’ll compensate you as much as you need.”

Kino looked up at the polite but serious man.

“You’re calling us because you know we visited Forsily, right?”

“That’s correct.” The man nodded firmly.

“Then I guess I have no choice.”

Kino and Hermes entered the man’s van.

Hermes was secured with rope to the large bed of the van. Kino sat in the passenger seat. She brought her persuaders along.

The van drove towards the central district. It soon entered the underground parking lot of a tall building.

It was a heavily guarded building, protected by security guards armed with persuaders. The man explained that this was the country's most luxurious apartment building.

Kino and Hermes followed the man onto an elevator.

They soon arrived at the top floor. When the elevator doors opened, they were greeted by yet another guard.

Kino crossed the soft carpet of the halls, pulling Hermes along. She was led into a large parlor, where the curtains had all been shut.

The person who wanted to meet Kino waited there.

She got up from her seat and turned to Kino and Hermes.

"Thank you so much for coming."

She bowed deeply.

Kino and Hermes recognized her instantly.

The man quickly served them tea and left the room.

Left behind in the parlor were Kino, Hermes,

And the woman they had seen on countless billboards.

Kino addressed the songstress across the table.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Forsily. My name is Kino. This is my partner Hermes."

"It's nice to meet you. Wow... you look even prettier in person!"

Kate Forsily, wearing the plain combination of a dark blue skirt and a white shirt, with her long hair tied back in a ponytail, bowed lightly at Kino and Hermes with a beautiful but downcast look.

"It's nice to meet you both. And I'd like to thank you again."

She then revealed the reason she had called them here.

"I asked the ward office to contact my management company if a traveler were to ever come looking for a 'Kate of Forsily'."

Kino met the songstress's resolute gaze and replied,

“I see. That’s why we’re here now.”

Kate continued.

“Yes. You’re the first travelers to come looking for Kate. Please, tell me. Why did you decide to visit that town?”

“...”

Kino looked away for several seconds, and turned to Hermes.

Hermes’s response was,

“Why did we come here in the first place, Kino?”

Instead of giving an answer, Kino got up from the sofa. She then pulled out the leather bag from the box next to Hermes’s rear wheel. She placed it on the table.

She could sense Kate drawing a sharp breath.

Kino did everything she could to calmly explain how she came by this bag.

How she had bought it in a country she had visited not long ago.

How she discovered several hidden letters as she drove along the plains.

How the letters were addressed to a ‘Kate of Forsily’.

And how she had visited the only ‘Kate’ in that village this morning, but how the woman did not recall any past lover, as though he had never existed to begin with.

Kate was listening to Kino’s explanation, her face frozen in silence like a beautiful doll.

“Those letters... Do you still have them with you?” She asked slowly.

“Yes. They’re still in the bag.”

“...”

Averting her gaze, Kate made to reach for the bag on the table, but suddenly hesitated. Her face took on a demonic look, but only for an instant.

Folding her hands over her lap once more, Kate looked at Kino.

“Kino. Please, sell this bag to me! Please let me keep it!”

Before Kino could answer, Hermes said in a joking tone,

“It’s gonna be expensive, you know? How much are you gonna pay?”

Kate’s answer was immediate.

“I’ll give you all the money I have!”

Her voice filled the spacious room.

“ ... ”

Kino was stunned into silence.

“Sold! Do you want a receipt?” Hermes said, still in a joking tone.

“Please!” Kate begged, “sell me those letters! I’ll pay you anything, so please!”

“Please calm down. These letters won’t benefit me in any way. All I wanted to begin with was the bag. And even then, all I need is something sturdy about the same size.”

“Then...!”

“And I have no intention of accepting such a ridiculous sum of money. I’d be thankful for whatever is enough to support me on my journey. But...”

“Yeah. We’re after something more important.”

“What are you looking for?” Kate asked Kino and Hermes.

“The answer to this mystery. To be honest, I’m very confused. If you know the answer we’re looking for, please tell us.”

About ten seconds passed in silence. Kate finally spoke.

“All right. But first... please let me read those letters.”

“Hey, don’t tell me you’re just going to *take* them and not pay!”

Kino ignored Hermes and said,

“Of course.”

Kate read the letters.

Her lovely face was still, only her eyes slowly scanning the words on the letters.

Even as she read the final letter, her expression refused to budge.

Once she was finished, she neatly folded up the letters and placed them on the table in a single pile.

“Big Brother, you idiot...” She whispered, her eyes averted.

In the silence, even Kino could hear her voice.

“May I ask a question?” She asked. Kate looked up.

“Of course.”

“Miss Forsily, you know who wrote these letters, don’t you?”

The answer would confirm her suspicions. Kate Forsily nodded.

“His name was Theo. He was from the town of Forsily. If he were still alive, he would have been thirty years old this year. He ran off three years ago to leave on a journey.” Kate said mechanically.

“Then who was this ‘Kate’ he was writing to? Who is this girlfriend of his?”

“I want to know, too.”

Kate smiled faintly at Kino and Hermes.

It was the gorgeous smile of a beauty, but her face was as melancholy as it was when she sang.

If the face of this morning’s Kate under the sun was like the flowers she had been tending to, the face of this Kate in the darkened room was like a flower blooming by night.

“The ‘Kate’ you met this morning is the woman Theo loved. There’s no mistaking it.”

“Kate Faraday, you mean?” Kino asked for confirmation. Kate Forsily nodded.

“Yes. Just like the letter says, Kate Faraday and Theo were childhood friends. They were the same age.”

“Then...”

Kino thought for a moment before continuing,

“Did she really move on and forget Theo?”

“Yes. She did.” Kate answered immediately. And,

“But there’s a lie in these letters. One lie that changes everything. You two are confused because you don’t know what Theo was lying about.”

“A lie?”

“What was it? And how do *you* know?”

In the room darkened by curtains, the songstress answered the travelers.

“Kate Faraday never dated Theo. The two of them were never lovers.”

“What do you-” “What?”

“Theo had a crush on Kate Faraday. Ever since he was old enough to understand. And even when they grew into adults. But they never went beyond having played together at village festivals when they were younger. He never confessed to her. Theo was timid, and he was never confident about his looks. He could never ask out the girl he loved.”

“...” “...”

Kino and Hermes were at a loss for words. Kate Forsily continued.

“Theo lived in that village, hopelessly in love with her, until he was eighteen years old. Then he moved to the central district to attend college. Even after that, he still loved Kate Faraday. Even though he’d never even really talked to her. He always thought, ‘Since I love her so much, one day we’ll be together’. Yes. He really believed this was going to happen. He came back to Forsily a few times a year, and he was sure that he would run into her somewhere in the village, and she would see somehow that he was a wonderful person, and confess her love to him.”

“...” “...”

“His fantasy was smashed to bits when Kate Faraday got married. Obviously, she’d completely forgotten him. Theo was crushed. He decided to escape from this country.”

“So... that’s why he left on a journey...” Kino finally managed to say. Kate Forsily continued stoically.

“Yes. Theo left this country, even though he’d never even considered going on a journey before. Even though he didn’t have the skills to travel alone. I’m sure that, the moment he stepped outside the gates, he changed around his past so that he and Kate Faraday were actually lovers engaged to be married, but that he had abandoned her to fulfill his lifelong dream of traveling.”

“...”

“These letters are proof. Theo wrote these letters he couldn’t send, to his fictional lover Kate Faraday. He was running away into a beautiful past he’d created for himself. I’m sure he must have lied to the people he met on his journey and told them that he’d left his lover behind to travel. But...”

Hermes continued where Kate left off,

“After diving into something he wasn’t ready for, he ended up getting sick and died, huh.”

Kate Forsily nodded quietly. She reached for her already-cold cup of tea.

“I see. Now I understand. The mystery’s finally been solved.” Kino said with a sigh, “Miss Forsily. A little while ago, you called him ‘Big Brother’.”

“Yes? Yes. I did.”

Kate sounded a little surprised, but she acknowledged her actions and placed her teacup back on the saucer.

“In other words, are you, Kate Forsily, the younger sister of Theo? Is that why you know so much about him?”

“Oh, that makes sense! I get it now. Mystery solved!” Hermes said triumphantly.

But Kate Forsily laughed.

She laughed ever so quietly.

“No.”

“No?”

“I’m not Theo’s sister. We’re not even related. We’re just both from Forsily. We’d known each other for years.”

“Then... how? How do you know so much about him?”

“It’s because I love Theo.”

“You must be surprised.

“I love Theo.

“Back then, I was little, I was timid, introverted, and shy around strangers.

“I wasn’t very good at sports or school. I was awkward at everything. That’s what I believed.

“I couldn’t even step into the friendly atmosphere between the other kids in the village. I always felt isolated. Things were so painful and sad back then.

“The one person I opened up to back then was Big Brother Theo, who was nine years older than me.

“We were kindred spirits.

“We both hated ourselves for being so talentless, but at the same time we loved ourselves so much that we suffered, not knowing what to do with that disparity. All we could do was languish in that pain.

“Big Brother Theo was always quiet, but he understood me better than anyone. He was always so nice to me, even though I couldn’t get along with other people very well.

“When I was a little girl, nothing made me happier than talking with him.

“Even after I moved away, we exchanged letters and sometimes met up together. We kept in contact regularly.

“Then, I found out that Big Brother Theo was in love with Kate Faraday.

“Back then, I didn’t know a thing about love. I even wrote him letters cheering him on.

“But he never confessed his feelings to her, and he lived on with his one-sided love.

“And once I became a teenager, I came to a realization.

“I realized that I was in love with him. That I loved him more than anyone else.

“But I couldn’t tell him.

“I thought there was no way things would work out when Big Brother was still smitten with Kate Faraday. I thought I would just make things difficult for him.

“So I wished that he would get together with Kate Faraday soon.

“But that never ended up happening.

“Kate Faraday married someone else, and Big Brother Theo decided to leave the country.

“I couldn’t say a thing to him.

“No ‘Don’t go’s. Not even an ‘I love you’.”

“I’m just like Big Brother Theo.

“I’m someone who couldn’t get her feelings across.

“I was so sure that Big Brother Theo would come back from his impulsive journey and turn his eyes to me.

“I was so sure that he’d forget Kate Faraday, and fall in love with me as I came to welcome him with a smile.

“I was so sure that, even if I never told him my feelings—even if I never confessed—that he he would know somehow. That one day, we could be happy together.

“Both me...

“And him...

“How could we be so naive?

“How could we be so stupid?

“But he’s never going to come back now.

“I’ll never be able to see him again.

“Never.

“Never again...”

Kate Forsily, her voice as cold as ice, suddenly took a deep breath.

She then let loose her emotions.

“I should have told him!

“I should have told him I loved him!

“I should have told him not to go!

“I should have begged him with tears in my eyes!

“I should have stopped hesitating and just told him I love him!

“Big Brother, how could you be such an idiot?!

“How could I be such an idiot?!”

Kate Forsily’s final utterance rang out through the room, and faded. Following next was, again, her voice.

Plainly she continued, as though reciting a familiar passage.

“As I waited for him, I wrote a song.

“Hoping my sorrows would fade with the melody.

“All I did was sing in the empty park,

“But never in my wildest dreams did I think so many would love that song.

“As I prepared for my debut, they asked me for the name with which I would sing.

“I decided on my name as though I was throwing up all the dark emotions inside my heart.

“My name would be Kate Forsily.”

At the end of Kate’s monologue, Hermes spoke up.

“If you’d told him, you never would have become a singer, huh?”

“No. But that doesn’t matter.”

“I see.”

Hermes was satisfied with her answer. He did not ask anything else.

Nor did Kino.

“Thank you for telling us all this. Now the mystery is solved. I finally understand everything.”

And,

“This bag and the letters are yours, Miss Forsily.”

Kate Forsily smiled.

“Tell me.”

From her lovely mouth came the words,

“I am Kate. These letters were written for me, weren’t they? ...They belong to me, don’t they?”

Kino gave her her answer.

Stepping into the sunlight from the underground parking lot, Kino and Hermes began to drive along the thoroughfare.

“Kate looked so happy in the end, Kino.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen anyone look that happy.”

“Me too.”

“Not exactly as planned, though.”

“Yeah.”

The traveler on the motorrad left the country. Time passed.

And,

It was around the time when the population of the town of Forsily had grown by one.

フォトの日々

「見えない真実」

— Family Picture —



Photo's Day to Day: The Reality I Wish I Could See — Family Picture—

My name is Sou. I'm a motorrad (Note: a two-wheeled vehicle. Just note that it cannot fly).

I was designed to be stored in a small car's trunk, so I'm kind of a weird motorrad. My frame is already small, but stuff like my handles and seat can be folded up, so I'm even more compact. I can't go that fast though.

My rider and owner is named Photo. Sex: Female. Age: 17. Has black hair that goes halfway down her back.

Photo and I used to be the possessions of a group of merchants. I was merchandise; Photo was a slave.

By some trick of fate, we had a hysterically run of good luck. The merchants were all wiped out by eating poison.

Photo became free and I became her partner.

A bunch of stuff happened and we made it to our current country, where we started to make a life. A bunch more stuff happened here and Photo became rich, but — she loves photography so much that she works as a photographer on request.

And that's where her name comes from. She has no past name.

—

A certain day.

"Sou! There's a letter! Read it, read it!"

The ever-cheerful master of this shop, Photo, came flying in from the entrance with her voice raised.

Jeans and a checkered shirt. Her long, black hair was pulled up from the nape of her neck and tied at the back of her head.

"Fine, fine. Show me, show me."

I replied to Photo like I always did from the living room of our house.

The letters that came to this house were usually requests for work (the rest were thank-yous).

Photo, who didn't even really go to primary school, can't read. She'd been practicing recently, bit-by-bit, and she could read and write simple words, but not enough to read commissions.

Photo smiled without a care in the world, "Okay!"

As always, she opened the letter and stuck it out in front of my headlight.

I could still read it if she didn't put it right there though. Motorrads have a field of vision that extends in all directions. The letter was upside-down. That didn't bother me though.

I have absolutely no clue how this letter was written — the letters were huge. It's like it was written as a newspaper headline.

I read it out loud, "'Excuse me — This is a request for the photographer on Poplar Street. Please take a picture of me and my family. I don't have much money, so I can only request three copies of one picture. I don't have much time either. Please visit my family soon! I'm sorry for being unreasonable. But there's no one else I can ask. I hope you will accept my request. If you will, please come to my house. As soon as possible.' — That's it. The address... oh, it's pretty close. We can get there in 30 minutes."

This country is unreasonably big. Driving from one end to the other would take two whole days. Something 30 minutes away is relatively close. On a side-note, when we get requests to take photographs somewhere far away, we rent a small truck and stay the night.

"Okay! Let's go right now, Sou!" Photo said, already pumped up.

Whether to take on work is something Photo and I agree on together.

It's Photo's job, so originally she decided on her own, but at one point, she

still kept accepting new requests without thinking about the work she already had piling up. Since then, I've worked to manage her schedule. After all, I can't have my only rider collapsing from overwork.

It was just 1 o'clock in the afternoon. The weather wasn't bad. There wasn't any work scheduled for today or tomorrow, and the day after that was a holiday in this country.

There shouldn't be any problems taking this job. I mean, it's just a single-shot family picture. And tell the truth, I wanted to drive.

"Sounds good. Let's go now."

—

"The weather's great, huh. Perfect for a picture, huh. Perfect for a motorrad, huh."

"Pretty much."

Photo and I rode at a casual pace down the country road.

The sky was a clear blue, and the temperature was just right (for Photo).

Photo wore a green jacket and a white helmet she'd bought here. It's called a "jet-type helmet," leaving a large part of the face uncovered, except for a transparent screen.^[1]

She wore gloves on her hands and boots on her feet that went past the ankle.

Helmet, jacket, gloves, and boots were mandatory when riding me. Wearing a helmet wasn't required by the country's laws, but I don't feel like seeing a girl's face or head get damaged.

Photo was carrying a rucksack of photography equipment on her back. It contained two single-lens cameras and two replacement lenses. It also held film, a thermos, and snacks, and there was a tripod tied on from the outside.

The rucksack was heavy, but a small frame like mine has no way to carry luggage. In order to keep the hard cameras from hurting her while we rode, she had sewed cushioning into the inside of the bag.

"Hey, Sou. What's that bird on the left side?"

"Ah, that's a thrush. That one's migratory."

"Oh... I want to try taking a picture. While we're around here!"

"You'd need a longer-range lens than what you have with you. You wanted one before, remember? Maybe it's finally time to buy it?"

"Well, I did want it..."

"The old guy at the camera shop was really pushing for you to buy it. Besides, you're rich. If you want to buy it, you have more than enough to afford it. If you ask nicely, you can probably have it by tomorrow."

"Well... I'll buy it if I have a really good opportunity, but right now I don't want to spend that much money."

"Okay. Well it is something you'd use for work. I think it's okay to spend some money on that. It's an 'investment,' you know."

"Investment?"

"I have to explain that, huh..."

Photo and I chatted as we continued down the road. Almost exactly 30 minutes after we'd left, we found the address that was written on the letter.

—

"Excuse me! I'm the photographer!"

I couldn't tell what was going on inside, but I could hear voices. Motorrads have good hearing, after all.

"Welcome — huh? Photographer?"

The middle-aged woman tending the shop had audible confusion in her voice.

Photo continued single-mindedly in her usual cheery voice, "Yes! I accepted your request and I came to visit and take your picture! I'll be ready in just a second! The direction of the sunlight is good here, so how about doing it in front of the shop? Ah, do you not have everyone here right now?"

"Wait, I don't understand what you're saying..." The woman no longer just sounded confused, she was really and truly confused.

"Photographer? Miss... Are you sure you haven't made some kind of mistake?" A middle-aged man's voice came from inside the store. The woman's husband, probably. "You probably came to the wrong address, right?"

How rude! This was the address on the letter, no mistake. You think we'd get lost? Photo maybe, but I'm a motorrad!

"Umm... We got a letter, and I don't think we got the address wrong..." Photo's resolve was gone, and her reply was timid.

As she spoke, someone else came down the stairs. "Ah, Dad! Mom! I wrote that!"

The letter's author appeared. Judging from the voice, it was a young boy, and judging from what he said, he was the son of this family.

"You're the photographer! I'm so happy! You really came!"

"Yes! I'm Photo! I'm here to take on your request for a family picture!"

In contrast to the two happy voices, the mother and father just seemed surprised.

"Huh? A family picture...?"

"You mean with the three of us...?"

The son explained to Photo, "I'm going to go away to school in a faraway town soon. I'll be separate from Mom and Dad for a while. So I want a picture of us three! I saved up my allowance so I can pay!"

I see. What a thoughtful young man.

The "three copies" mentioned in the letter must have been so that his parents could each have one too. "A faraway town" in this country really would be far away. He wouldn't be able to visit home easily.

Just to make sure you're aware — cameras are extremely valuable in this country. As in, buying a camera was the same as buying a car, sometimes even more.

For regular citizens, they'd only get a chance to get a photo once every couple years. There were many people who had never seen a picture of themselves.

The value of a single picture here is completely different from that in a country where regular citizens have cameras.

And so — the parents would be deeply touched by their devoted son's sudden request, celebrate his new life, smile and cry a little for the camera, and then Photo's work here would be done.

At least, that's what I imagined, but the father sounded dismissive, "I... don't like 'em. Don't like pictures."

The mother agreed in open distaste, "Me too, they're just... Why don't you give it up?"

Not at all what I expected.

"Come on! Dad! Mom! We'll never get a chance like this again! This lady will take a picture for really cheap!"

This exchange continued for a while longer, with the son desperately trying to convince them to take a family picture, and the parents stubbornly refusing.

The parents said all sorts of things; that having your picture taken was rumored to make your health worse or get your soul sucked away, that even a relatively cheap photograph would still cost a lot of money, and besides, a little girl like this wouldn't be able to take a good picture anyhow.

I could vouch for Photo's skill, at least. But I was parked outside the shop, and couldn't interrupt. Photo didn't respond with anything like that either. She should be more confident.

"If you want a picture that bad, then take it by yourself. You can keep it here when you leave. Go ahead."

"But Dad, then there's no point! It has to be a picture of us three together!"

"Well I say no! Mama, you look after the shop for a bit," the father declared, and there came the sound of footsteps plodding up the stairs.

"I don't want a photograph either. You can take it by yourself, just as your father said. Also, it's not good for your eyes, so stop with the letters!"

And with that, the discussion was over.

The silence hung for a moment.

"Umm..." I heard Photo's troubled voice. I thought that maybe, not knowing what to do, she'd want to leave without finishing the job, but instead she said, "For right now, why don't we step outside? We can talk out there."

Which is to say that she wanted to get away from the parents and include me in the conversation. Not bad, she was able to make a pretty calm decision.

The kid agreed and I heard two sets of footsteps coming out of the shop. The footsteps got closer, until Photo was standing next to me.

"This is my partner, Sou the motorrad. Sou, this is our client."

Standing with a hand on the wall of the shop was a boy of about 12. He was tall for his age, thin, with short blond hair, and sunglasses.

It was unusual for a boy his age to be wearing sunglasses out here in the countryside. I understood the reason soon.

"Hello. Mr. Motorrad. My eyes are really bad, so excuse me for wearing my sunglasses."

Now I understood. His eyesight was weak. He kept his hand on the wall in order to keep track of where he was.

"Sou! Our client's parents —"

Photo had started to explain, but I interrupted, "I heard it all. They don't want to take a family picture at all, right?"

"Yeah! What should we do...?"

"Well the subjects themselves really don't want to be photographed. There's nothing we can do, right? What are you going to do, tie them up by the neck and make them?"

"But... I guess you're right..."

Photo was dejected. Standing next to her, the boy was also dejected.

I asked the boy, "There's not much time before you leave, is that right?"

"Yes. I'm leaving in the morning in three days."

Three days, huh. Not very flexible.

"I'm entering a government school for the blind. I might go completely blind in the future. My parents said I should just help out in the store, and that I can always hire someone to follow my directions, but that's not what I want. I want to be able to work for myself and study to become a masseur."

I see. Wanting to be independent, despite a handicap is admirable. It's also admirable that this country was willing to support that.

"School for the blind?"

I gave a brief explanation to the puzzled Photo (the concept probably never existed in the country Photo had been born in).

Then I asked the boy, "So you'll be living in a dorm, right? And that's why you want a family picture."

"Yes. Also, because my eyes are like this, I can't really see my parents' faces that well. I'd be able to see them in a picture though, so I was looking forward to that... I didn't think Mom and Dad would hate pictures that much..."

"Well, it's common with older people."

"But what should we do...?" The young man was severely distressed.

"What should we do...?" Photo was just as severely distressed.

I mean, Photo could just say, "Under these circumstances, we can't fulfill the request," and leave, but that wasn't her. Instead she was thinking alongside him.

It couldn't be helped, so I offered a suggestion, "If it's just the boy alone, we could take the picture right now."

The two of them nodded. Yeah, it'd be great if we could just take it right now.

"But that wouldn't satisfy either of you, would it?"

"Right. I really want a picture of all three of us! Smiling!"

Of course, that's only natural for a family picture.

Photo agreed, "Yeah, that's no good! That's not a picture our client can bring to school and say, 'This is my great family' about!"

True enough.

"Then that'll be our last resort. Let's try undercover photographs."

"Undercover photographs?" "Undercover photographs?"

Their voices synced up perfectly.

"Yeah. The kid brings his parents outside. Make up whatever reason you need to. Then make them smile. Photo will be lying in wait for that moment and will take the shot."

"Aha..." "Aha..."

Their voices synced up perfectly.

Photo asked, "But how do I take it? If I'm there, they'll run away, right? If I have to snap a quick shot... I don't know if I can get a good picture..."

A reasonable question, but I already had the answer.

"Photo, look back. There's a grove of trees 64 meters away, facing the front of the shop, right? You can set up the tripod and hide over there."

"Ohh, I get it... But I can't take a good portrait from that far away, you know? They'll be tiny, and you won't be able to see their faces."

"Sure you can. If you buy that long-range lens."

"Ahh..."

"There's no better opportunity, right?"

Two days later, early morning.

Photo and I were in a grove of trees.

It was thick with undergrowth and fluttering insects.

I was hidden in the shade of a thick tree. "Do your best, Photo."

"Got it! I'll only have a moment, right? For my shot!"

Photo was thoroughly charged-up, sitting in her folding chair and peeking through the viewfinder of the camera, fixed onto its tripod.

The long-range lens was a thing of beauty, as long as a bat. The morning before, the old shopkeep from the camera store had brought it over, grinning uncomfortably wide.

Well, the thing costed more than an average person's annual wage. I'd smile too.

The lens was abnormally large and heavy, so it was attached to the tripod. The camera itself was hanging out behind it.

This lens would make it possible to take a picture of the three of them from dozens of meters away as if they were right in front of us.

We'd spent all of yesterday practicing with the lens.

We'd left early this morning with the lens in a trunk that you might expect someone to carry gold in. Of course, Photo couldn't carry it on her back, so we rented a small truck. We drove through the darkness and successfully made our way to this grove in secret (on a side-note, Photo really doesn't mind getting dirty or going through trouble when it comes to photography).

Photo wore the same green cloth over her head that she used to cover the camera and lens, and she tightly clutched the release (cable to press the shutter).

"Okay, any time now..."

Her eyes shined like a hunter lying in wait for its prey. I suppose gunshots and snapshots are similar like that.

Photo had already set the exposure time and readied the focus.

If the boy could get his parents outside, then Photo should be able to get a perfect shot of their faces.

I couldn't guarantee that they'd be smiling faces though.

—

We waited there without moving for three full hours.

"Hey!" I said, curtly.

"Mm!"

Photo, who had been showing signs of weariness, sharply straightened her back and put her eye on the finder again.

The shutters of the shop were lifting up.

The boy with the sunglasses came out.

He spent a while setting the shutter in place and opening the windows to let in fresh air.

"..."

Photo and I both kept watch, without moving a muscle — well, I can't move of my own free will anyway — and then the boy's figure disappeared back into the shop.

Photo and I both wondered, "Did he fail?"

But a moment later, the boy came, leading his parents out of the shop. The parents were in their pajamas, but they didn't show any signs of doubt as they followed the boy —

"Not yet..." Photo sighed.

The mother was standing behind the boy, and Photo couldn't get a good shot when they overlapped.

Then, the boy suddenly began doing morning exercises. He swung his arms, he twisted his hips.

Laughing, his parents started to join in. As they did, they spread themselves out so they wouldn't bump into each other. Well played.

"Nice!"

There was the sound of Photo pressing the shutter and the camera's film roll turning.

The three figures continued their morning exercises, and Photo continued shooting.

Eventually, they finished, and as they stood next to each other —

"Wow, wonderful!"

Photo took another shot.

The boy was flashing his teeth, beneath his sunglasses.

Next to him, his father smiled too, as if saying, "What got into you all of a sudden?"

On his other side, his mother smiled too, as if saying, "It was fun though."

I wondered if it was captured well in the film cell.

The three of them disappeared into the shop, and Photo turned to look at me.

"Sou! We did it!" she said, her eyes wet.

I don't know whether she noticed —

But when the parents came out of the shop, I got it. I understood.

Why the two of them hated the idea of a family picture so much.

After that, we quickly packed up.

Photo worked hard to carry the luggage into the truck, drive me onto the carrier, and then tie me off with rope.

We hurried home and brought the film into the usual developing place. It was a holiday, but yesterday we had begged and paid a fee to have it done today.

We asked for five copies of each shot. The boy was leaving tomorrow, so there was the fear that showing him the film and asking him to choose wouldn't be enough time to have the developing done.

All of that made this an excessively expensive job, but Photo hadn't cared.

"We'll be able to take their picture! Isn't it exciting?!"

That night, the finished pictures were delivered.

There were several shots of them exercising together, and then at the end, their smiling faces all lined up; the perfect family picture.

"Yay! Yay! Yay! Yay! Yay!" Photo bounced up and down in joy for the great pictures. "We can still make it! Let's go deliver them today!"

She already had her helmet on, but I said, "Wait a second, I need to tell you something."

Photo sat down in a chair.

I continued, "Didn't you notice anything after looking at the pictures?"

"Hm? — Ahh, I know! The long-range lens is great! I'm so glad we bought it!"

"Well, that's true, but..."

This wouldn't work. I had to just say it.

"Look carefully at the last picture. The kid doesn't look anything like either of his parents, does he?"

—

That's right.

It was plain to see that the boy and the parents were different.

The boy had blond hair, but the parents had brown and black.

The boy's skin was white, but the parents' was dark brown.

I knew immediately. The boy wasn't related to them by blood.

Photo stared carefully at the picture.

"Okay, I can see now that you mention it," she agreed readily, "but still, even if they're not blood-related, a kid is a kid and a parent is a parent." She finished without a care in the world, just an oblivious smile.

Well... It's not that her way of thinking was wrong, exactly.

"If he had normal eyesight, he would have noticed. But —"

"Wait... He doesn't know?"

"The parents were really against taking a picture. There's a good chance, don't you think? And if we give him the pictures, he'll find out. That's what the parents were afraid of. That we'd just let it out so easily. Right now, you can still choose to tell him 'I couldn't take it' and not show him. What do you think?"

Photo replied immediately.

—

The next day.

The morning the boy was leaving.

Photo and I drove under the clear sky for 30 minutes to get to the shop.

Photo's backpack held one camera and one envelope full of pictures.

When he heard the sound of my engine outside, the boy called out happily from inside the store, "It's Photo and Sou!"

He was wearing a jacket that was a little too small for him. Dressed up for the big day.

"Were you able to get the picture?" He stood with his hand on the wall of the store, and beneath his sunglasses, he was smiling with his whole face. Of course. We told him that if we failed, we wouldn't come.

"Yes, did we! But —"

"But?"

"I want your parents to see them first. And I want to apologize for photographing them secretly. Could you let me talk to your parents alone for a bit?" Photo sounded resolute.

"Okay, I understand. I'll be on the other side of the store."

—

Photo left me out in front of the shop and walked in by herself. I would have liked to go in as well, but I'd have to leave this one up to her.

"Oh? Miss Photographer..."

"Hm? Oh..."

The mother and father noticed her immediately, without much warmth in their voices.

"Please have a look."

I could hear Photo take the pictures out of the envelope and spread them onto a table. Then I heard the two of them gasp in surprise.

Before they could say anything, Photo continued, "I'm sorry for taking these in secret! I haven't shown these to your son yet! I felt like I should show them to you first!"

"..." "..." The two of them were silent for a moment.

The mother said, "We didn't even go to his school. We got the townsfolk to help us... But this is how he finds out..."

She said it as if it were a curse. I'm sure that she felt annoyed by Photo, to her very core.

"Now I understand why you didn't want to take the picture."

"Then, if we say we don't want you to show our son these pictures, Miss, will you listen?" the father said.

From the expectation in his tone, it was clear that they intended to hide the truth, no matter what.

And then Photo, my master replied, "No."

"What?" "What?"

"I will show these to your son. That's the job I was asked to do by my client. I intend to see my work through."

"..." "..."

"The question is what you want to do after that," Photo proclaimed to the stunned couple.

"I like pictures, but pictures can't do things. Pictures can't run away. Pictures can't tell the truth. Pictures can't do anything. The ones that do things — are always people."

Photo and I were outside the shop —

The boy held one of the pictures up to his eyes, almost close enough to touch his sunglasses as he gazed at it. His parents in turn were watching him.

This was probably the first time in his life that he was getting a clear look at himself and a clear look at his parents.

For seven minutes and twelve seconds, the boy stared at the picture in silence. For his parents, who stood looking like they were at a funeral, it must have felt like seven hours.

In the end, the two of them hadn't tried to stop Photo by force or anything from revealing the pictures. I don't know whether they chose not to run or whether they felt they couldn't run from it.

The boy finally looked away from the picture. First, he turned to Photo, "Miss Photo! I'm so happy! I'll treasure this! Thank you so much!"

"You're very welcome!"

Of the four humans here, there was a drastic difference between the two that had beaming smiles and the two that wore grave expressions.

One of the smiling people turned to the two that weren't. "Dad! Mom! I'm so happy! This is the first time in my whole entire life that I've seen your smiles! I'll keep working hard once I get to school!"

"..." "

Their response was troubled.

He saw the picture, so it should have been clear to him that they looked different.

They were probably thinking over all the same possibilities as me.

First, it was possible that he had already figured it out by himself (or someone had told him) a while ago, and he'd been lying. But this was unlikely.

Next, he might not find it weird at all that they looked different and he was

just really happy. This wasn't impossible, but they looked so different that it would be unnatural not to be concerned about it at all. Given how smart the kid seemed, it didn't seem likely.

The last option was the most likely.

That is, that he couldn't see it. His eyesight had deteriorated to the point that he couldn't even see the picture in front of his face.

Why.

Photo had gotten so far, but she'd never be able to show him the picture.

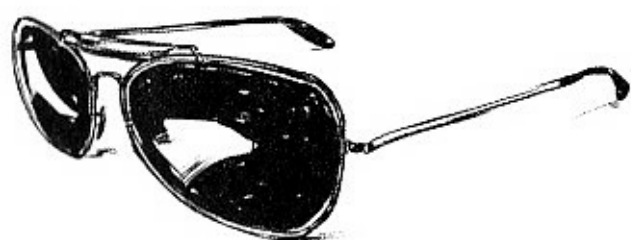
"You..." The mother had noticed, but couldn't find the words.

"Ahh," the father figured it out soon after, his eyes going wide.

"Hurray!" Photo was the only one who didn't understand.

I wondered whether I should tell Photo the truth.

Almost like the boy's parents.



Translator’s Notes

- 1. ↑ Otherwise known as open-face or 3/4



フォトの日々

「残されたもの」

— Return —





Photo's Day to Day: Things Left Behind —Return—

My name is Sou. I'm a motorrad (Note: a two-wheeled vehicle. Just note that it cannot fly).

I was designed to be stored in a small car's trunk, so I'm kind of a weird motorrad. My frame is already small, but stuff like my handles and seat can be folded up, so I'm even more compact. I can't go that fast though.

My rider and owner is named Photo. Sex: Female. Age: 17. Has black hair that goes halfway down her back.

Photo and I used to be the possessions of a group of merchants. I was merchandise; Photo was a slave.

By some trick of fate, we had an unbelievably run of good luck. The merchants were all wiped out by eating poison.

Photo became free and I became her partner.

A bunch of stuff happened and we made it to our current country, where we started to make a life. A bunch more stuff happened here and Photo became rich, but — she loves photography so much that she works as a photographer on request.

And that's where her name comes from. She has no past name.

—

A certain day.

"I want to take a picture of a snowy landscape!" The master of this house, the master of this shop, that is, Photo — jumped to her feet and said.

The afternoon news on the radio had said that snow was piling up in the mountains to the north. In the central district where we lived, it was still autumn, the season of brilliantly colored trees, but this country was

astoundingly large.

Photo had shot several landscapes — no, she had taken dozens or maybe even hundreds of landscapes, but none of them were snowy landscapes.

"I bet the snowy landscapes up in the mountains must be wonderful! Sou! Let's go right now!"

Photo said it so simply and happily — but no, hold on. It's not that simple at all.

Photo had abandoned her lunch and grabbed the camera hanging in the entryway, looking ready to fly out of the house immediately.

"Sit down. Finish your food and listen," I said to her.

"Okay." Photo flopped into her chair and resumed eating.

Today's lunch was a sandwich of cheese, ham, and lettuce between two slices of bread, with a bit of mayonnaise and mustard drizzled on. Also, an apple and a cup of tea.

I say "today's lunch," but it should really be "the same thing for lunch today."

Photo was more than wealthy enough to order luxurious meals every day, but things were always like this instead. I think it's better to get nutrients when you're young, but whatever, let's forget that for now.

I was propped up on my center stand in the living room, at a spot near the door, and next to the table. My usual spot.

"I know you want to shoot the snowy landscape. I'm not against that."

Munch munch. Yeah yeah.

Photo chewed and nodded.

"But, as I think you already know, you can't ride me on a snowy road. I mean, if there's only a little snow, and you keep your feet on the ground, it's not impossible — but if there's ice, it's a definite no-go."

Munch munch. Yeah yeah.

"So you'll have to rent a truck like normal, but that's where I have a suggestion to make — Photo, it's about time you bought one."

Munch much. Yeah yeah, yeah?

"Buy one? A truck? Us?" Photo stopped eating to ask. Verb, object, subject; in that order.

She had always rented a small truck in town whenever she needed to travel long distances or carry anything heavy, but those times had been getting more and more frequent, lately. Soon, it wouldn't cost any more to just outright own a truck instead.

"Buy one. Then you won't have to go into town to rent one every time. Keep a full set of camera equipment inside and load me in there too. Then you can go wherever you need to, whenever you want. When you get on-site, you can bring me down and ride me then. Doesn't that sound attractive?"

"Hmm. I guess so," Photo thought it over as she ate her apple, which was sliced into eight pieces. Photo liked to eat them with the skin still on. "It's an investment, right? If it's for work, it can't be helped."

"It can't be helped" is what Photo said out loud, but she knew full well that having a truck would make photography even more fun for her, and she looked a bit happy.

Well, she didn't have to be stingy if there was a good reason to spend money.

"Got it! Okay! Let's buy a small truck! Then let's go shoot a snowy landscape!"

—

And so —

Two days later, a new business appliance arrived for "the photographer on Poplar Street."

It was a truck that was mostly used in this country by the wealthier farmers.

Aside from the "wealthier" ones, most of the farmers in this country still used carts pulled by horses, oxen, or mules. Private automobiles were still only for the rich.

The truck we'd bought was small, with two seats, but it could carry up to 400kg. Including me, of course.

The undercarriage was sturdily built, so it could run over even rough roads. Except for the fact that it wasn't a very smooth ride, it was a useful vehicle.

The new truck shined in its fresh blue paint. There were used vehicles available, but a lot of them had been run hard by farm work, so we gave up on that.

"Hmm. Very cute, very cute. Nice to meet you! Oh, should we come up with a name for you?"

"You can, but it won't respond, you know?"

"Oh... Then let's not."

"... Thanks."

After that, Photo loaded me onto the truck and tied me down with rope so I wouldn't fall over, and we went on a tide drive.

At the very least, the small truck ran well on the narrow paths that cut between the fields. Photo had come here to this country, driving for 15 days in a much heavier truck, that would have been suited for crossing an entire continent, so driving this truck wasn't much of a problem for her.

Once she'd gotten a good handle on it, and we were driving smoothly along, I said, "Hey Photo. You might as well advertise your business."

"Advertise? How?"

"Don't worry, you'll see. Let's head towards town. Take a right at the next intersection."

And so, Photo met with the town's painter and had the words "The Photographer on Poplar Street" painted on both sides of the truck. Below was the address for requesting work via mail.

"Now you'll be advertising just by driving around?"

"Sou! You're amazing! You're a genius!"

Well, I'm no idiot, but I'm not exactly a genius either.

If anything, it was weird that this sort of advertisement wasn't on every vehicle in the country.

"Okay! Let's go!"

It was early morning, just a few days after Photo had suddenly said she wanted to shoot a snowy landscape.

"Sure. Off we go."

We set off into the north.

I was loaded into the back of the truck, and Photo was driving. The rest of the truck bed was piled up with boxes.

The sturdy metal boxes contained a full set of photography equipment.

There were a number of expensive SLR cameras, a number of lenses, a tripod, and a ton of film. To prevent theft, the truck bed was secured with chains and locks.

In the cab of the truck, Photo had a sleeping bag and a blanket so she could sleep there, and food and water so we wouldn't have to buy supplies on the road. It was fit for a grand adventure.

Photo wore her long black hair in a three-strand braid that fell in front of her.

She had on a pair of thick, khaki pants, a brown, wool sweater, and a vest for photography, with lots of pockets. Lacking in feminine charm, as always. And, since we were headed into the snow, she also had gloves, a knit cap, winter boots, and a down jacket.

"Great weather, huh. Perfect for photography, huh."

Beneath the winter's morning sun, surrounded by poplar trees that had lost almost all of their leaves, the small truck drove down the road.

From the container, I talked to Photo through the open window into the cab.

"I memorized everything about the route. I'll let you know whenever the road starts winding. If you start feeling tired, let me know right away."

"Got it. Is it okay to stop if I want to take a picture along the way?"

"Sure, but if you take too many, you'll run out of film before you can

photograph what you really want. Don't forget your end-goal."

"Yeah, you're right. Got it."

That was how we'd left in the morning.

Along the way, we stopped to rest for a few pictures, and once more for lunch. By the time we reached the snow-kissed foot of the mountains, it was already dusk.

Seriously, this country is way too big.

—

That night.

"Huh? I can lay down just fine on the seats! I'm not going to waste money!"

"Oh come on, just find a place to stay! You've been driving all day. You're definitely more tired than you expected."

"I've driven for 15 days straight before, remember?"

"That was an emergency. How are you going to take pictures out in the cold snow tomorrow if you're exhausted?"

We'd spent the whole day driving, and we'd come a long way north. It was already cold where we were, and at night, the temperature would drop close to below zero. Somehow, I managed to convince Photo that it was better to stay at an inn than try to save money.

The inn's matron was suspicious whether someone as young as Photo actually had money to pay. I guess she might have thought Photo was some apprentice that had stolen the truck from work and run away.

When I offered to pay upfront, she finally gave in and let us stay. Photo was extremely wealthy — enough to buy this entire inn if she really wanted — but it was probably best not to say so.

Facing out towards the road, the entrance to our room was next to a parking lot. Photo parked the truck out front, and then brought me into the room with the camera equipment.

Photo scarfed down the bread she'd brought and then started servicing a camera on top of the bed.

"It's so exciting, huh. I'm gonna wake up early tomorrow! I'm not sleepy at all!"

"Yeah yeah. So where are we going tomorrow? You can photograph the snow from anywhere around here."

"Uhh let's see." Photo brought out a map and said, "Here!" pointing past the mountain roads at a village.

There in the heart of the mountains was a name and the symbol for a village.

"If there's a village out in a crazy place like that, I want to photograph it!"

She was right, it was an insane place for a village.

The contours on the map were drawn really closely together there, which mean it was in a pretty deep ravine. It didn't look that far away, just from the map, but the road twisted and turned. Proof that it was a mountain road.

"Got it. You'll have to be more careful driving than ever before. Even with me giving instructions."

"Okay!"

Photo always agreed readily like that.

—

The next day, late morning.

We looked down at the snowy village.

"Pretty! It's so pretty, huh Sou!" Photo was being emotional and smashing down on the camera shutter.

"Yeah, the scenery here's not bad," I replied, still loaded on the back of the truck.

We were on a mountain ridge.

We'd been trudging, climbing up the snowy path in the truck, and now we were at the peak. The road opened up into a wide viewing platform.

The sky was cloudy, but there was no snow whipping around. From the ground to the sky, the world was painted in white.

The truck's wheels had chains put on.

Photo had climbed in the truck, slowly and steadily over the slippery road. She definitely didn't want the brand new truck breaking down here, not even one-tenth thousandth of a chance. It had taken us quite a long time to get here.

"Ooh! Cute! It's so pretty and cute!"

Photo spoke as if all her exhaustion from driving had already been blown away. She set the tripod on the truck bed and use the long-range lens to take pictures of the village.

The village was cute, just like Photo said.

It was easy to see from up high. Down in the narrow chasm, 53 houses were lined up, all in a row.

The rooftops were angled at 60 degrees to help snow fall off of them, and they were painted in a flashy red color, like tropical fish. The walls were painted an equally vivid green, creating a magnificent contrast. Red triangles and green pentagons, growing out of the snow.

"Hey, Sou! I bet the countries you hear about in fairytales are just like that!" Photo said.

She was replacing the film in her camera, which she had done so many times before that she could probably do it with her eyes closed and still be quick about it. Almost like a trained soldier, replacing the gunpowder and bullets in a persuader (Note: a persuader is a gun).

We were there for a while, as Photo took pictures from the ridge.

When Photo was being thorough about her landscape shots, she wrote down the shutter speeds and aperture sizes she used onto a small notepad.

After she had had her fun, Photo lit the small stove that was loaded on the truck, and heated up a can of soup. She ate the soup standing up, dipping some of the cold bread into it for a while to warm it back up.

Maybe due to the cloudy weather, the temperature today wasn't too low (On

clear days, the Earth radiates more heat away, and it gets way colder). ^[1]

Still, thick plumes of steam came up from the hot soup. Enough that from time to time, I couldn't make out Photo's face on the other side.

"Looking out at the snow like this and eating hot food is... really nice, huh," Photo said as she ate, sounding deeply moved.

"I guess. It's not possible for those that died, that's for sure," I said subconsciously.

After we started living here, we hadn't really talked about what happened on that mountain again.

"..."

I looked over at Photo, who had stopped moving, and for a second, I wondered if she was lowering her eyes.

"You're right," Photo said, looking straight at me with her big, dark eyes, neither crying nor smiling. "Right now I'm doing what the dead can't."

With that, she held up the camera that was hanging from her neck and pointed it in my direction. "Sou! Smile!"

Click. With a tiny sound, she took my picture.

I don't know whether I was smiling.

—

After the photography session on the ridge was over, we started our descent towards the village.

As we made our way into the valley, the amount of snow on the ground increased. The snow reached up to 20 centimeters, and the truck drove on the mountain path at the same speed a human might walk. There were no other vehicles.

We intended to go into the village like this, but to them, Photo and I were "strangers."

I had no clue whether they would actually let us in, just to take pictures.

So we had decided that as soon as we met a villager, we would ask. If they gave us permission, we would take pictures, but if not, we'd give up and leave quietly. If we left right away, we should be able to make it back over the mountain by nightfall.

The village probably didn't have an inn. If we were going to take pictures, we'd be spending tonight in the truck.

"Maybe they'll get mad at us..." Photo said nervously from the cab.

I didn't know how it would go either. We just had to take a shot.

We came to the end of the mountain path.

Be could see the cute houses that were packed into the forest of conifer trees.

—

"Wonderful, huh! Beautiful, huh! We have to go again, huh!"

Back at the house on Poplar Street, in the section we used as a photography shop, Photo was shaking as she looked through the film of the shots she took.

The lightbox was on the table, and on it was the film that had just been developed.

The reversal film that Photo uses could be viewed if light as shined through it (very different from negative film, which can only be viewed after it's developed into prints).

The gray, snowy world and the colorful village were all there, through Photo's loupe.

Ten days had passed since the photography trip.

On that day, when we went into the village — the elderly villagers gave us an enthusiastic welcome.

I guess they saw us while we were coming down the mountain.

Many elderly villagers were waiting for us at the village's entrance, and then brought us into the village in celebration, "There's a girl here to take

photographs!"

The village was all elderly folk, children, and women; there were no working-age men. That was natural for them though. In the winter, the men took a break from farming, woodcutting, and hunting in order to go into town and find work before the snow came. That additional income had been supporting the village for years.

That was part of life here in this remote village and in these peculiar houses. This stupidly-big country was full of diverse places, and this was just one of them.

They told us about their history, and it seems that in the past, there were more villages in the mountains. Before this country was unified, those villages used the mountains in place of walls and watchposts.

But once the country was formed, people left the harsh mountain life for more convenient lives elsewhere, and the number of villages dwindled. These days, there were only a few other places like that.

Since villages like that were so rare, I thought maybe they should try to make it a tourist attraction, which might enrich the country a little more.

Photo got to take pictures of the snowy landscapes she'd dreamed about, as well as several shots of the smiling villagers.

It was the first time any of them had had their picture taken. They had all begged to be photographed, "Me too, me too," and they had thanked Photo with more meat and fish than she could eat.

Every single one of the elderly people we met had said the same thing to Photo. The exact same thing.

And every time she heard it, Photo happily replied, "Okay!" and took a picture of the village.

In the end, Photo stayed at the village chief's house for two nights, and spent the whole time taking pictures.

If she hadn't run out of film (and we had brought a lot of film), we might have stayed even longer.

On the morning of the third day, Photo took another picture of the clear, morning landscape in the snow, and then everyone in the village — even though they totaled less than 100 — saw us off.

After that, it took a full day and a half to make it back here.

The large amount of film that we'd taken to the developing studio had just been finished for us to pick up this morning.

Photo peeked at the film through her loupe, and made markings by the shots she liked.

"Sou! There were some bad ones, but I got a bunch of great pictures! Even the villagers! Let's go back there in the spring!"

The village was going to be shut out by the heavy snowfall soon, so we wouldn't be able to go there with the small truck for the rest of the winter. Mailing the pictures wouldn't work either. Only the bare minimum of supplies necessary for emergencies could be sent, so the regular mail service couldn't make it through.

So I said, "Yeah, we'll have to go again. In the spring. They'll love it."

Once spring came and the snow melted, we'd go back to the village with the finished pictures.

We had a plan.

Well —

If this was the end of the story, that would have been fine.

The winter was close to ending.

We heard that the village was hit by one of the largest avalanches ever, and 20% of the villagers had lost their lives in the disaster.

Just like before, when we had heard about the snowfall to the north, Photo and I were listening to the radio around noon.

The announcer read it very matter-of-factly, as if it were a simple fact and happened all the time. He didn't even pause after that before moving on to discussing the upcoming parliamentary election.

"Sou!" Photo had just been about to start eating her sandwich, but now her expression changed and she

"Yeah, that's the village. What a disaster."

"W-we have to go! We have to go! We have to go! Because, because... Sou! We have to go! We have to go!"

"That's enough — I know what you're thinking. But we can't get there today. Plus, you have photography work at the elementary school and the farms here tomorrow and the day after, don't you? We can go after that's done."

"Yeah, but... Yeah, but... Yeah, but... Yeah, but..."

Even with her eyes clouded over, Photo finished her work. The two days of photography that were requested were finally over.

In that time, Photo had been listening to the radio without pause. She even bought the newspaper in the mornings, but there were no further reports about that village.

It was a shockingly huge country. An accident that caused a dozen or so deaths out in a remote part of the country that no one knew about just wasn't interesting to people.

That night, Photo wordlessly put the photos she'd been planning to show them into a file folder.

Photo had racked her brain while picking out pictures from the large quantity of film she'd used and had had them printed at a small, picture-frame size.

Then, early the next morning, we got into the small truck and left.

Poplar Street was already warming up and it felt like spring was around the corner, but in the mountains we were heading to, the snow was still piled high.

I watched over Photo to make sure she didn't press too hard on the

accelerator in her impatience. We ran north without stopping to take pictures. We stayed the night at the same inn we had before.

The woman there remembered Photo quite well.

Here, we heard a bit more of the news about the avalanche. According to the innkeeper, the men from the village that were away on work had come rushing back in a panic, two days ago.

Right now, I guess they'd still be more focused on clearing up the damage than trying to rebuild. More focused on whether they could make it through the snow.

I wondered if Photo was going to prepare for tomorrow and then go straight to bed.

Instead, she said, "Let's go eat something!"

She took me on a rare excursion out to a nearby restaurant. Then, just as rare, she spent a reasonable amount of money, and ate her fill of some hearty-looking food.

"Ah, I ate too much," Photo said from the inn's bed, as she fell asleep.

The next day.

The weather outside was perfect.

We reached the mountain ridge and looked down.

The avalanche that had come down the mountain was covering the village, and there were colorful wreckages peeking out of the snow. It was a tragic sight. Something, somewhere had started an avalanche, and it had destroyed close to 30% of the village.

The snow had all fallen from the slope, so it seemed that there wouldn't be any further avalanches.

We descended over the mountain path, where most of the snow had melted,

on towards the village.

Just before the entrance to the village, there were several vehicles parked where a large space had been cleared. They were machinery transport vehicles with treads, but otherwise they looked similar to our small truck.

These vehicles weren't here before, so they must either have been the vehicles that the village's men had returned in or the vehicles that were being used to help clean up the debris. There was no one nearby.

Photo parked the truck here and pulled me out, down from the cargo area.

I don't know whether the snow had been removed by the villagers or simply melted away, but either way, the streets were clear. I was thankful to be able to run on it.

Photo had her favorite single-lens camera hanging from her neck and film in the pockets of her winter clothing and in her backpack as she took me out for a ride.

I really wanted to tell her to wear a helmet, but I let her get away with not wearing one when she was going around and taking pictures.

As soon as we entered the village, we saw the first place that had been hit by the avalanche.

The snow that had crashed down from the right-hand mountainside had cut down the trees in its path and then slammed into the village houses with a considerable amount of force.

It wasn't just snow. Large trees had snapped and tumbled in as well. All five of the houses there had been completely destroyed. Ironically, the forest there was supposed to protect against avalanches.

I remembered who lived in those houses from the three days we spent in the village.

I don't know whether Photo remembered, but, well, she probably didn't forget.

"..."

Photo brought me to a stop and looked at the scene — and then held up her

camera.

I think she hesitated for about three seconds.

Then, click.

She took one shot. The film rolled, and she took another one.

Then, after the third shot, a man's voice came calling, "Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

The man was maybe 30 years old, with a stern face and a figure that was tall and broad.

He must be one of the men that had been out of the village for work and had rushed back here. He appeared from the other side of the wreckage and steadily came closer, making his way through the snow with a practiced stride.

Noticing the man's voice, five other men's heads popped out from the rubble, like moles.

The first man — why don't we call just him "the male villager" for now? He continued to walk towards Photo, with anger on his face.

"..."

Photo didn't say anything, but dismounted me and propped me up on my center stand.

Then she waited for the male villager and the other men behind him to approach.

"You're not from around here. Who are you?" the male villager asked, looking down at Photo. Behind him, the other men were whispering things like, "Do you know her?" "Nope."

"My name is Photo. I live in the central district. I came here before to take pictures of the village."

Photo's voice didn't falter, even though she was a step away from a man that was two heads taller than her.

"This is my partner, Sou."

Yes, hello.

"So what? I don't care about your motorrad."

Hey hey, what do you mean you don't care? I thought it, but I didn't say it. I wasn't that that oblivious to the mood here. I let Photo handle the talking for now. Besides, it was interesting.

"What I wanna know is why you're going around taking pictures as you please! You just took some, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"Is it fun? Taking pictures of the state our village is in, is that fun for you? Huh?" the man shouted.

"It's not fun at all. But I took the picture because I thought it was necessary."

Ahaha. Photo just came right out and said it.

I couldn't see Photo's face, but I could see the anger rise on the male villager's face at her perfect response.

"Y... you bitch! What about this is necessary? People died here! There are still bodies buried under there! We lost our homes, the village is in ruins, we don't know what we're going to do from here on out. What part of any of that is 'necessary' to you?"

It's not like I couldn't understand why the man was angry. Those were his honest, human feelings. Well, not that I was human. But you know, as a sapient being.

Photo replied immediately, "'Pictures of the village' are. When I came here before, all of the elderly men and women here told me the same thing. 'Leave a record of the village,' they said. They said it over and over and over!"

That was true.

During our stay, they had been very intent on that.

In this village where no one had been photographed before, the scenes of the past would eventually be lost to time, except for in their memories.

Those memories wouldn't be around forever either. When they died, their memories would die with them.

The elders, who knew that kind of pain well, asked Photo to create a detailed record of the village for them. They hoped for her to preserve the village forever.

That was why Photo had shot so many pictures. She shot and shot and shot.

She took the beautiful village and saved them into beautiful film.

So, that's why —

When she heard about the village's destruction, she was of course worried for the villagers, but she also felt that she needed to record this as well.

Photo yelled, "Even if it was destroyed! That's still part of the village's history! This is a moment that needs to be passed down to future generations! Even if they're sad memories, they have to be kept!"

"..."

Photo didn't flinch at all, looking at the man that was far bigger than herself.

"And when the village is rebuilt by everyone's hard work, this will be precious evidence of that history! So if I don't take these pictures right now, then who will?!"

With that rebuke, Photo reached into her backpack and drew out the thick file folder.

She pushed it out towards the male villager.

"W... What?"

Photo didn't respond; she just kept holding it out. I couldn't see, but I'm sure she was making quite a face.

The male villager hesitantly took the folder, removed his wet leather gloves, and then opened up the cardboard folder. He saw the pictures inside.

"Ah..."

At the male villager's sigh, the others behind him leaned in to look, and were similarly struck speechless.

That was only natural.

The pictures inside were of the village as it was.

The beautiful village that they'd held in their memories and waited to return to.

The male villager's hands shook slightly as he passed the pictures back. Then his hands stopped at one of the pictures.

The male villager's eyes widened, and the men behind him let out murmurs.

I could tell what was in the picture, more-or-less, at least.

"M-mom... No way... It's a picture of Mom..." the male villager muttered. "I can't believe it... Mom's smiling... and there's the house..."

The man's house had been swallowed up. His mother had died.

He had probably thought that he would never get to see his mother's smile ever again.

But he was wrong.

His stern face distorted and tears sprung from both of his eyes, but the male villager still stayed staring at the picture. The men behind him wore meek expressions as they looked at their friend and the picture.

Photo took a few steps to the side, prepared her camera, and took a shot of the scene.

As usual, she was only courageous in these strange situations.

The crisp sound of the shutter brought the men back to their senses, and they looked at Photo. But they didn't make any sounds of condemnation or anger.

"I'll come to this village again. I'll continue shooting records until the village is back to the way it used to be." Photo faced the male villager, tears still in his eyes, "So — I'll be waiting for the day the village is rebuilt."

Photo (and I) met the elders of the village again.

They cried tears of joy to see her again, and when she offered her sympathies and handed them the pictures, they cried even more.

They were pictures of their dead family members and friends. There were also pictures of Photo being treated to a delicious meal by the village chief's wife.

The men returned to the repairs, and Photo returned to her photography.

No one else tried to stop Photo. They fell into their work with determination and sweat, as Photo took several pictures.

The labor wasn't progressing, with just the village's men there to work on the repairs. After another two hours, they finally managed to recover one of the dead bodies.

At this rate, how long would it take? Right now the villagers were living together in the houses that remained standing, but they couldn't live like that forever.

I said to Photo, "Hey, that's enough for today, isn't it? Let's go home."

"Huh? Right now? I was expecting you to say it's too far of a drive."

"The circumstances have changed. If we leave now, we can make it over the mountains before it gets dark. Once we're back on level ground, you can take a nap and then keep driving. We should be able to make it back by noon tomorrow."

"Sure... but why?"

Photo asked, her doubts clear on her face, and I responded.

—

"15 Days since the Tragic Disaster on This Beautiful Village. Having Received the Goodwill of the Country, They Show Signs of Steady Recovery," read the headline.

Below was an article that went into more detail about the village.

It talked about how the country had pitched in their support to help the village recover.

Soldiers had already been dispatched to help clear away the snow from the avalanche site. Donations were pouring in from the citizens.

Photo held the newspaper in her hands.

She was still learning to read, so I read the article for her.

Several days worth of newspapers were stacked on the desk. The latest newspaper contained several large pictures.

They were, of course, the ones that Photo had taken.

A picture of the houses that had been brutally destroyed in the avalanche. A picture of the elders and children taking refuge in their friends' homes. A picture of a dead body, covered by a blanket. A picture of the village in a happier time.

And — a picture labeled, "Man crying at a picture of his dead mother."

The newspaper was printed in white and black, but still, that didn't weaken the power of the pictures' message.

That day, I had Photo take the pictures to the news media.

It wasn't something we had ever done before. Photo wasn't a journalist, and she didn't care to go chasing after scandals and accidents.

But the circumstances were what they were. This time was an exception.

Photo agreed to my suggestion, and she pushed herself to drive all-night so that we could make it back to the central district in the early morning. The fruits of her effort were there in the next day's newspaper.

The story spread through the general populace and so did the outpouring of support.

Donations were collected, and the government started moving.

Well, it didn't hurt that the politicians were eager to look good, with elections as close as they were.

—

"Hey Sou," Photo said, as she set the newspaper down on the desk, "when should we go back?"

She didn't say it outright, but it was obvious that she meant the village.

The reconstruction of the village had become Photo's photography theme. She probably wanted to photograph it all year-round.

"Good question. Other than four days from now, when you have work, anytime is fine, don't you think?" I said, without thinking too much about it.

"Hey Sou. Would it be wrong to take less work so we can go to the village more often...?"

I was quite surprised by Photo's reserved question.

"No no! There's nothing wrong with that at all!"

It's not like Photo had an obligation to work in the first place. She had plenty of money. It would be fine if she even wanted to set aside the entire year just to photograph the village.

"But you know, if I get requests, I still want to do them if I can."

"Remember when I told you before that you can't do the work of two people at once?"

"Yeah."

"Well, you don't have to take on the work of both 'the part of you that wants to go take pictures of the village' and 'the part of you that wants to work.'"

"Yeah?"

"Well — I do think you should live more for your own enjoyment," I said, as casually as I could, so Photo wouldn't try to overwork herself anymore.

"You're right. I'll work hard to do that."

I don't think I really got through to her.

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ While not explicitly mentioned in the text, but this would be further amplified by the snow albedo where they are.

Afterword —Preface—

HELLO.
THIS IS KUROBOSHI KOUHAKU.
KINO NO TABI HAS FINALLY ARRIVED AT
VOLUME XVI.
ROMAN NUMERALS ARE HARD TO UNDER-
STAND, HUH...
I CAN'T TELL AT A GLANCE WHICH VOLUME
IT IS.
ESPECIALLY WHEN IT'S LIKE IV OR VI,
WHICH IS WHICH?
AND SO, FROM THE NEXT VOLUME ON, I'VE
STARTED PUTTING ARABIC NUMERALS
SOMEWHERE ON THE COVER PAGE.
TRY TO FIND THEM NEXT TIME.
BUT I KIND OF FEEL LIKE I FORGOT
ABOUT THAT MYSELF...
SO IF YOU CAN'T FIND THEM NO MATTER
HOW LONG YOU LOOK, I APOLOGIZE.



WITH THAT, LET'S MEET AGAIN IN THE NEXT VOLUME.

"Whoa, I got it! I got it!" (Editorial Department Revision: Starting with dialogue is a good choice.)

At that time, I was deeply moved.

—

The white disk broke, right in front of me with a pow.

The shattered disk, fell to pieces, like powdered snow.

I'm sure you've already figured it out (Editorial Department Revision: No, I think the vast majority of people won't understand), but currently, I am clay target shooting.

—

That's right.

I, Sigsawa Keiichi, 40 years old, am holding a gun, in Japan, legally. I was issued a license to own.

In March of this year, I went to the police, to a psychiatric hospital, to town hall to provide proof that I wasn't bankrupt, and to the local gun store. Got a ton of paperwork (Editorial Department Revision: Standardize your writing style, please).^[1]

—

So now, having obtained a real shotgun, I'm shooting clay targets down, pa pow.

"Down" and "pa pow" rhyme.^[2] That's really funny, I think. (Editorial Department Revision: Don't say that about your own writing, please)

—

Right now, my skill, is still low.

You know, if I had 5000 yen, for every time, I missed a target with my gun, I'd be a rich man. (Editorial Department Revision: Standardize your style. Also, I

don't think young people will get a joke from "Harley ○○ vidson and The Marlbo○○ Man") [3]

But, I'll polish my skills, and in the future, I'll go to Nationals, and then someday, to the Golympics. (Editorial Department Revision: Either "Go-Rin" or "Olympics," not both) [4]

I don't know what to say, when I, win the gold medal, but it's making me excited. I'm so nervous, I can't focus on my work. (Editorial Department Revision: Please focus. Actually, just focus, without the "please." Also, are you aware of the proverb "counting your chickens before they hatch"?) [5]

If you're wondering, why I had such a big, change of heart, when I used to think, "I can shoot, overseas, so it's okay, if I can't in Japan," the reason, is that, last year, something big, happened. (Editorial Department Revision: This sentence is too long)

I think the people that read, the last volume of "Meg and Seron," know what I mean. Last year, near the end, of the autumn, I had a huge, injury.

I was very lucky, I had several bone fractures, so I spent several hours, under anesthesia, while they performed surgery, and only a week-long, hospitalization. (Editorial Department Revision: No, your injuries were quite serious)

And so, on the hospital bed, you know, while I ate, the hospital's pudding, it came to my mind. (Editorial Department Revision: Your writing style here suddenly turned way too soft) [6]

"In life, one never knows what the future holds. Enjoy life while you have it, and really, what is it that you enjoy?" (Editorial Department Revision: Now it's too hard) [7]

—

That's what went, through my mind, as I ate my third pudding (Editorial Department Revision: That's too much).

I thought, "From now on, I'm going to try, lots of things I want to try."

"If I fail, then I fail, but I'm going to stop, assuming I'll fail, before I try."

—

It's best, to decide, whether it's impossible, and whether, to continue, or not, after trying.

And, even if you fail, isn't that okay?

As long as, you look, for something new, that's okay.

—

I am thinking, about what, my next dream will be, and how to live from now on.

Iesu, ai, keepu, on, doriimingu (Editorial Department Revision: Why English?).
[8]

Thank you, very much, for reading to the end.

Heisei Era 24, November 10th Sigsawa Keiichi

—

P.S.

My dream, of writing an afterword, that's entirely hiragana, has come true.

—

P.P.S.

What, is your, dream?

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ Here, Sigsawa used the plain form "-ta" form instead of the more polite "-mashita" form, which he had been using earlier in the afterword, until just now.
2. ↑ The Japanese word for a clay target is "enban," and the sound Sigsawa used was "ban ban"
3. ↑ Here, Sigsawa uses the casual "da ze" to end his sentence. Also, I don't think the whole "if I had a nickel" thing actually originates from that movie.
4. ↑ "Go-Rin" literally means "Five Rings," so it's a common term for the Olympics.
5. ↑ The Japanese phrase is "counting tanuki skins you haven't caught."
6. ↑ Sigsawa uses a lot of filler words that sound childish/girlish here.
7. ↑ Here, Sigsawa uses archaic filler particles/conjugations.
8. ↑ Sigsawa writes this in transliterated English, and the Editor writes in actual Latin characters.